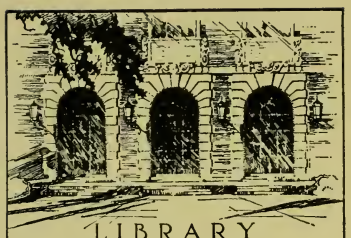

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3 vols

THE TWO ARISTOCRACIES.

A NOVEL.

BY

MRS. GORE.

"Nous ne prétendons qu'à une chose; c'est à peindre avec fidélité les mœurs de notre temps dans un certain monde. Si le tableau est triste, nous espérons de la justice de nos lecteurs qu'ils voudront bien ne pas s'en prendre exclusivement á nous."—FOUDRAS.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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V. 1

THE TWO ARISTOCRACIES.

CHAPTER I.

"I'm sure I don't know what ever we're to do with him!" murmured Mrs. Barneson, the wife of a thriving apothecary in the cathedral and garrison town of W.; glancing wistfully at an uncouth, well-grown lad of eighteen, who sat refreshing himself with tea, and something more substantial than toast, in a remote corner of her roomy parlour, while two little girls in pinafores watched, with hungry faces, the progress of his meal.

"The best thing to be done with him, just now, is to let him eat his supper in peace, and go to bed after his journey," rejoined one of the elder daughters, engaged with their mother at the evening table in homely needle-work—mending or making.

"His father might be angry at missing sight of him; and Barneson won't be home these two hours. He has got to stop at Stoke on his way back."

Too intent upon his supper to be disconcerted by their observations, Mark Barneson munched on in silence. He felt himself a stranger at home. Adopted in early childhood by his mother's brother, a wealthy north-country farmer, by whom he had been educated at a commercial school at York, his brother and sisters were as yet scarcely known to him; and though the Barneson family had outthrived the difficulties which, at the time, suggested the adoption, they had learned with dismay, at the recent decease of Mark Holden,

that his nephew succeeded only to his blessing, and a legacy of five hundred pounds. The bulk of his property was bequeathed to his widow.

So bitter indeed was the disappointment of Mrs. Barneson at finding herself and her offspring overlooked by her childless brother, who, till his marriage a few years before, had treated them as his heirs, that her sisterly mourning was exhibited in hems far too narrow, and crape much too scanty, to satisfy the severe decorum of a cathedral town.

No less offensive, however, in the censorious eyes of W., was the haste with which the widowed Mrs. Holden signified to the family that steps must be taken for the removal of their son. In consequence of his uncle's marriage, he had been left overlong at school; —a superannuated head-boy, whose mathematical proficiency had put more than one bepuzzled usher to the blush; and it was really time for his parents to decide on his future career.

In place of the jolly Christmas holidays heretofore enjoyed by Mark amidst the good cheer and good fellowship of a Yorkshire farm, he consequently found himself the unwelcome inmate of a frugal, formal household; an object of supercilious patronage to his elder sisters; who, accustomed to the spruceness and jauntiness of military costume, had little indulgence for his ill-cut suit of second cloth, his lanky locks, and dreary aspect.

"How different from poor dear Edward!" whispered Maria Barneson, when at length the uncouth lad departed to his attic.

"Hardly fair to compare them," rejoined Anne, the second sister; "think how differently they have been brought up. Ned has enjoyed a thousand advantages. Ned is a Wintonian, a gentleman, a soldier; poor Mark, a bumpkin, reared among bumpkins. Mark has never associated with any thing above bagmen or boors."

"Hush, my dear Nancy, hush!" cried her

mother, scuffling off the younger children to bed. "You should be cautious in talking about such things before those little chatter-boxes. Who knows but they may be repeating your remarks before Captain Knowles and the officers!"

"Whether they do or not, mamma," observed Maria, "Capt. Knowles cannot remain blind to the fact that Mark has not been brought up among gentlemen's sons, and is quite unpresentable."

A sentence of condemnation to which Mrs. Barneson responded by so heavy a sigh, as to elicit a most indecorous burst of laughter from Chrissy, her third daughter, who had hitherto stitched silently on. She was instantly reminded that the family mourning was still too deep for any such hilarious indulgence.

"You were all laughing at poor Mark's towy hair and errand-boy's cap," she retorted. "May I not feel equally amused at your feeling so ashamed of your own flesh and blood?

Maria is already wondering how we are to suppress him, to-morrow, when Captain Knowles drops in to luncheon."

Her sister attempted an indignant denial—but Chrissy persisted.

"Even mamma admitted, just now, before the poor fellow was out of hearing, that she did not know what to do with him."

"That, my dear, regarded the future prospects of your brother," replied Mrs. Barneson sententiously. "Till lately, we looked on Mark as provided for. Till lately, we expected he would succeed your uncle in his farm, and therefore felt at liberty to allow your brother Ned to follow the bent of his inclinations and enter the army."

"I'm afraid the bent of his inclinations waited for nobody's sanction," rejoined Christina. "Who was half so surprised as my father, when Ned showed him the letter from the Horse Guards, promising him a commission?"

"At all events," observed her eldest sister, "the belief of having but one son on his hands, reconciled him to Edward's choice of a profession. And now, with five daughters at home, to have Mark thrown back upon him for a maintenance, is a heavy trial!"

"Poor Mark! He would, perhaps, have done better to catch the fever that carried off my uncle," replied Chrissy, who was apt to blurt out truths to which nobody liked to listen. But her straightforwardness kept her elder sisters in check; and next morning, when Mark, more sheepish-looking than ever, joined the meagre family-breakfast, Anne and Maria did their best to cheer him into sociability, and put him in conceit with weak tea and stale bread-and-butter.

But their hollow civilities did not reach his heart, any more than their scanty diet satisfied his digestion. Mark had been reared in an atmosphere of love and plenty. He was a bird of another nest; and fine feathers and fine

notes did not content him. Though his uncle had been beguiled by a specious woman with a handsome face, out of the power of fulfilling his generous intentions towards his nephew, he had cherished the lad tenderly to the last. The Barnesons did not survey with fonder partiality their handsome hopeful of the epaulet, than the honest farmer his ungainly adopted.

The criticisms to which he was now subjected, were consequently a surprise. His faults of dialect had already passed into a family by-word, and his clumsy movements seemed to excruciate the dainty Maria. When, according to Chrissy's prediction, Captain Knowles *did* "drop in to luncheon," a very intelligible hint from his sisters admonished him that, till their visitor was gone, it might be as well to make himself scarce.

Day after day did the poor fellow, chilly and hungry, wander up and down the dreary cloisters, or hang about the cathedral, wondering how long he was to remain a burthen to

himself and others; while his father, who had signified to him on the day following his arrival, that he must prepare to work for his bread, appeared too much absorbed in his own business to decide, or signify, in what trade or calling the bread was to be worked for.

On his former visit to W. with his uncle, previous to Mark Holden's marriage, they had been welcomed as rich bachelor uncles and their *protégés* are apt to be. But now, he dared not open his lips in dread of the irony of Maria and Helen and "the officers;" who questioned him concerning the manners and customs of his uncle's house, as though addressing a newly-caught bush-ranger, and affected surprise at hearing that his Yorkshire schoolfellows were neither tattooed nor decorated with noserings.

Before the close of the week, he was thoroughly miserable, and ran some risk of abhorring the garrison of W. in general, and Captain Knowles in particular; nay, of regard-

ing with somewhat less than fraternal affection the gallant ensign his brother, who appeared to have absorbed the affections of his family; when, one morning, as he was shirking off, as usual, to avoid being hinted out of his mother's parlour before the blaze of red coats and gold lace became visible above the horizon, he found himself plucked by the sleeve, just as he reached the sullen shadow of the cloisters.

"I have been trying to overtake you these ten minutes, my dear Mark," panted his sister Christina, taking resolute hold of his arm.—"Why have you never asked me to walk with you?"

"Because I did not care to be snubbed. I'm but a plain country lad, Chrissy: not fit company, I dare say, for my sisters and their gay captains; but—"

"Are you sure," interrupted Chrissy, "that the gay captains are fit company for your sisters?—And do you remember, Mark, how much happier and merrier we all were when

we lived in the poky house in the Watergate, last time you were here?"

"I remember that you then laughed at other things besides *me*. And though my father did not keep his carriage, or my mother give dinners and tea-parties, there were not half so many shabby shifts in the house."

"How can we be otherwise than shabby with seven children to provide for, and my poor mother bent upon keeping up appearances, in hopes to forward Maria's settlement in life? My uncle's will has been a sad blow to her. She was always telling Captain Knowles of her rich brother in Yorkshire."

Mark was no longer listening—Mark had become cogitative.

"What you have been telling me, Chrissy," said he, after some minutes' reflection, "explains the proposal made to me this morning by my father. He wants to bind me to his business, and invest my uncle's legacy in the concern. When I come of age, he promises to take me into partnership."

"Have you accepted?"

"Refused, point blank."

"You are perhaps, like my sisters, ashamed of my father's calling?"

"Not ashamed of it, but disgusted with it. Medicine is called a noble science; to me it is a nauseous profession. I was surprised to find him so vexed at my refusal; but I understand it all now. It was my money, not my services, he wanted. And the money, poor old fellow, he shall have."

"To squander in entertainments to Captain Knowles, and gay dresses for Maria and Anne? Take care what you're about, Mark. That legacy comprises your whole fortune. Those five hundred pounds are what the cat was to Whittington, and may make a man of you at last."

"If by man you mean Lord Mayor, Chrissy, I would almost as soon be a country apothecary!"—

"You have grown proud, since you became rich."

"*Rich?*"—

"At all events, the richest of your father's children."

"You seem almost to grudge me my legacy. But I can tell you one thing;—that, if wanted for the use of the family, I'd sooner throw it up at once, and enlist as a cabin-boy, than idle about at home, an object of ill-will to everybody, which I never was before in my born days," added poor Mark, with something of a choking in his throat.

"Not exactly *everybody*.—You overlook a certain sister Chrissy, who cried her eyes out when her playmate was carried off into Yorkshire, fourteen years ago; and is ready to cry them out a second time, at seeing him without pluck to stand his ground and fight his own battles."

"What would you have me do?"

"Certainly not shirk out of the way of Captain Knowles; who is to be our brother-in-law, if ever his family can be brought to

consent to his marriage with Maria, and my father manage to scrape together two or three thousand pounds to start them in life—two things very unlikely to come to pass."

"Then why is he always in our house?"

"Till a month ago, they were in hopes of assistance from my uncle; and have hardly recovered the shock of their disappointment. Then, Anne is all but engaged to a brother officer of Ned's, with scarcely better prospects than those of Captain Knowles. But *he* is a good fellow:—more in earnest, and better qualified to rough it."

Mark heaved a desponding sigh. Three soldiers of fortune in one family formed a somewhat large allotment.

"But, at this critical moment of your affairs, Mark, why not consult your friends?" persisted Chrissy, grieved by his want of spirits, and a little angry at his want of spirit.

"*Friends?* — when even my sisters are ashamed of me!"

"I forget the name of the school-fellow with whom you spent the holidays at Birmingham, two winters ago—"

"Zack Lambert?"

"Of whom you then appeared so fond. Why not write to *him*, and ask his advice?"

Mark Barneson stopped short in his rapid trot, and pressed tightly, and as if thankfully, the arm of his companion.

"You're right, Chrissy. The Lamberts *are* my friends. I must be a dolt to have overlooked them: kind, conscientious people—the best counsellors in the world. I used to be a great favourite with old Matthew Lambert. I'll write to Zack this very day."

"And who is old Matthew Lambert?"

"A forge-master in a considerable way of business;—proprietor of the famous Bracknell Works.—Zack is about to enter the firm."

The active-minded Christina took care that her brother's resolution should not relax, till the

letter was written and posted; and the result was, an invitation to the young pariah to spend a week or two with his friends the Lamberts. "It would be better to talk matters over before they gave an opinion."

No difficulty arose at W. The Barnesons evidently thought he could not go too soon, or stay too long at the Bracknell Works. If so fortunate as to pick up another generous uncle on the road, it would be a great relief to the family.

CHAPTER II.

Poor Mark Barneson seemed born to disappointment. When exiled from Ryecroft Farm by the death of his uncle, his heart was comforted by the prospect of reunion with the family from which he had been so long alienated. But he was soon undeceived. His warm affections were checked by sudden frost.

Again, when a monitor among the inky desks and rickety benches of the old school-

room at York, he had looked forward to a breezy, out-door, wholesome country life, to compensate for the excess of Euclid and Algebra with which he was crammed. His uncle was such a cheery companion, such a pleasant taskmaster : and the free range of Ryecroft Farm, so congenial to his feelings !

But in place of these recreations, he had now to seek employment in a manufacturing town, where, at that season of the year, the gas was lighted at three in the afternoon ; and the hue of the sky at all hours of the day, was of a pale chocolate.

By his friend Zack, he was received with open arms. Independent of schoolday chumship, Zack Lambert cherished a lively recollection of certain happy summer holidays spent at Ryecroft, previous to the marriage of its master ; which constituted his sole experience of the country,—the real country,—the country of woods and cornfields, ponies and fishing-

rods; and he seemed to love his old playmate the more on learning that he was banished from this Garden of Eden.

For young Lambert, like most only sons, detested his father's calling quite as cordially as did Mark Barneson. The stifling atmosphere, the perpetual clatter, the narrow horizon, of the Bracknell Works, were an abomination to him. Above all, he hated the confinement of business life; and like Mark, would willingly have adopted the vagrant existence of a cabin boy. Bold, boisterous, and selfish, he wanted to go a pace of his own.

A newly-awakened suspicion of the shortcomings of his son, rendered old Matthew circumspect in complying with Zack's earnest entreaties that he would find employment in his establishment for Mark Barneson; whose want of experience and want of capital were certainly no recommendations.

His small fortune had been placed at the disposal of his father. But the worthy

iron-founder liked the young stork none the worse for his filial piety; and on recalling to mind the high character for steadiness and abilities borne at York by his son's young friend, he finally consented to receive him in his counting-house, as clerk.

"And so, my boy, we're about to run in harness together. Your pen 's to come to the scratch, next week, for the behoof of Lambert and Co!" cried Zack, slapping his friend heartily on the back. "You're too good a penman, you know, to be wasted on the anvil and bellows. Not looking, I hope, for a prime minister's salary? For the first year or two, Lambert and Co. never vouchsafe a stuyver to their clerks beyond thirty pounds. But you're to be one of the family, Mark, if you can put up with our homely fare."

Young Barneson signified his grateful acceptance, and all was speedily arranged. No need to return home and encounter anew the careworn face of his father, or the supercilious

scrutiny of his sisters. He proposed to fall to business at once.

"To tell you the truth, old chap," said Zack, when he saw him thus earnest, "I suspect that one of the governor's chief motives for adopting you as an inmate, is to secure a safe companion for his scapegrace son. Though I've two years the advantage of you, in age, Mark, you're ten years steadier; and he seems to hope that you'll pull me up, now and then, when you see me going too fast. As if I had not bullying enough in the family already!"

The "bullying" was, as Mark Barneson soon discovered, of a very mild order. The Lamberts were dissenters,—grave and rigid in their habits,—anything but violent. The children were reared in peace and quietness. The mother was a home-staying, self-denying woman; the father, a just man. It was the very household for a young man suddenly thrown on his own resources, and

aspiring to create for himself, by his own industry, an honourable independence.

Before six months were over his head,—before Maria's engagement had progressed a step towards delivering his mother's parlour from the lounging of listless Captains,—the routine of a sedentary life brought its usual results. Young Barneson was becoming almost fond of the occupation in which his regularity and intelligence procured him frequent commendation.

When Christmas came round again, he had become a decided favourite with old Matthew. Not, however, because the purpose of his adoption into the family was answered; for Zack, apparently of opinion that the steadiness of his friend, in some degree exonerated him from attention to business, grew wilder and more pleasure-loving than ever; and even his mild mother occasionally raised her voice in reprehension. But the new clerk remained punctual as clockwork; though forced to resign

to his friend Zack many and many an hour, he would fain have devoted to study. The disadvantages arising to his half-educated old master from his inferiority in mathematical science to his own foreman, warned him to master those practical and technical difficulties which the ignorance of the elder Lambert, and carelessness of his son, too often pronounced to be unsurmountable.

Already, a remote hope of working his way into the firm, by supplying funds from the head instead of the pocket, glimmered in the distance.

It was consequently a real grievance when, on summer evenings, installed with his books and diagrams,—books, the purchase of his earnings, and problems worked out in many a morning twilight stolen from his rest,—his quiet little attic, his ark of refuge, was invaded by Zack ;—elated and noisy ;—sometimes insisting on dragging him from his work for a saunter along dusty roads, to some skittle-

ground or pigeon-match; or, in unfavourable weather, to listen to flighty anecdotes of his mode of "dodging the governor," or of his sprees of the preceding night.

To be patient with him, to bear with him so as to retain over his mind some shadow of the influence which was now fast waning, was, however, a tribute due to the liberality of the Lamberts. His salary was already doubled. His place at the hearth-side was that of an adopted son; nor, from the hour he entered the house, had a harsh word or forbidding look wounded his feelings. Whatever might be the press of business, no undue burthen was laid upon his shoulders. Whatever the household disorders created by the folly or intemperance of Zack, the stranger within their gates was never made to smart. Was it much to sacrifice in return those treasured minutes, which, though due to recreation, he chose to connect with the business of the day?

It was, however, a struggle. For as months and years passed on, and his advancement as a clerk proved as moderate as every thing connected with the sober-sided house of Lambert and Co., he became grievously aware how essential might be his future aid to the support of his family. His capacities and industry would be taxed to the utmost. He could not afford to squander a single moment of his leisure.

Nor was this all. The confidences of Zack Lambert were becoming such as he could not listen to without confederacy in evil. His restraining influence was gone. His habits of life rendered him only an object of pity and ridicule to the incipient gent., who found at the billiard-tables of some commercial inn, companions more congenial than his prosy friend. It was only when his purse ran too low for such resorts, or he had but half recovered the excesses of the preceding night, that he deigned to seat himself on poor Barneson's table, and

commit ravages on what he called Professor Mark's pot-hooks and hangers, nearly as destructive as those of Sir Isaac Newton's lap-dog on the labours of the great philosopher.

One cheerless evening, late in the autumn of Mark Barneson's fourth year of clerkhood, young Lambert burst into the little attic, where a single long-snuffed candle scarcely enabled Mark to decipher his ill-printed school-books; his face flushed, his voice husky. He came not, as formerly, to apostrophise the zealous student as "you confounded old sap!"—or to endeavour to beguile him to some oyster-club or dancing saloon. It would have suited him as little as it had formerly suited poor Mark's fastidious sisters, to be seen in his company. His object was to coax or bully him out of a further loan. For out of a certain fund of a hundred and twenty pounds, economized from his salary, more than two-thirds had already passed into young Lambert's possession.

But this time, Mark was inflexible.

"I can do nothing further for you, Zack," said he. "You must remember that when I handed you that five-pound note, last week, I told you the rest was bespoken."

"Yes, yes,—bespoken!—The cant word of every lender to every borrower."

"But I am not a lender, and use no cant words; least of all, Zack, to *you*."

"I'd rather have the slightest of flimsies, than the grandest of professions," cried young Lambert, hoarsely and coarsely. "Come Mark, there's a good fellow, down with the stumpy!"

Barneson unlocked the drawer of the writing-table, where his money was deposited, and gave ocular demonstration to his companion that his purse contained only a few shillings.

Induced by the movement to anticipate acquiescence in his demand, Zack Lambert uttered a cry of disappointment, followed by an indignant oath.

"Why, what the deuce can you have done with the money?" cried he; "you're too much of a miser to have *spent* it."

"I have lent it to a person who has stronger claims upon me than yourself."

"I should be curious to see him, Mark Barneson. Why, but for me, not a shilling of this hoard would ever have come into your grip. But for me, you'd have remained a half-starved apothecary's boy at W. for the remainder of your days."

Pale with disgust at this ungenerous taunt, the poor clerk restrained his resentment; for he saw that the excited young man had scarcely the command of his reason.

"If after what you have said you were worth talking to," said he, "I might perhaps shame you by stating that it is one of the children of the apothecary at W. who has obtained those few poor pounds. Had you fulfilled your promise, Zack, to repay what you owe me the last time you received your

allowance, I should have been better able to do my duty by my poor sister."

Zack Lambert really humiliated, began to stammer excuses. He wanted to embrace his injured friend. He was almost in tears. But Mark, though he extended his hand in forgiveness, was not to be won to cordiality by these maudlin demonstrations.

"Go to bed, Zack," said he. "Go to bed! You are in no state to be seen. To-morrow, we will talk about your affairs."

Roused to fresh anger by these remonstrances, young Lambert flung out of the room and stumbled down the narrow stairs; while Mark, with an aching head and heart, resumed his task. He had lost his boyhood's friend. He saw it,—he knew it;—but it was through no fault of his. The only doubt upon his mind that did not bear reference to his problems, was whether he did strict justice to Lambert and Co., by screening from the father's knowledge the misdoings of his son.

He worked late that night—later than usual—for the vexation of spirit under which he was suffering "murdered sleep." His candle having burnt out, was replaced by one from his self-furnished store; and so chilly was the night, that he was forced to sit muffled in an over-coat, the picture of self-denying, comfortless perseverance.

The first of the small hours had been announced by the jarring gateway-clock of the Bracknell Works, and he was just beginning to put aside his papers for the night, when a step became audible ascending the stairs which led only to his room. Believing it to be that of Zack, returned from his orgies, he hastened to bolt his door for the exclusion of the untimely visitor.

A low tap, and the voice of Mrs. Lambert requesting admittance, undeceived him. But he could scarcely have been more amazed had the ghost of Sir Isaac, or of Euclid himself, preferred the request. With his master's

wife, though nearly three years her inmate, he had not exchanged ten times as many words. Mrs. Lambert was a demure, taciturn woman; who, though she provided steaming jugs of linseed tea for his catarrhs, and sanctioned by a frigid smile the annual presentation to him of comforters and muffatees knitted by her young daughters, Rhoda and Lettice, seemed at other moments scarcely conscious of his presence in the house. When, having hastily opened the door for her admittance, he beheld her shivering in her night-dress, candle in hand, she might indeed have been a ghost, for any vestige of colour in her countenance.

"Is anything amiss?—Is Mr. Lambert ill?" —was his first hurried exclamation.

"Mr. Lambert is asleep and well," she replied, cautiously closing the door, however, before she spoke even in a whisper, lest she should alarm the house. "But my son, Mark Barneson,—my son.—where is *he?*"—

"In bed and asleep, also, Ma'am, *I trust*," he answered, hesitating as he recalled to mind the circumstances under which they had parted.

"I am come from his room—and it is empty," said she, sinking into the chair from which Mark had risen to admit her. "I am told it is often so,—*nightly* so: and that *you* know it,—that *you* abet it,—that you share and foster his profligacy."

At any other moment, Mark would have indignantly defended himself. But the blanched lips and fixed eyes of the poor mother, showed her to be so intensely agitated, that he thought only of relieving her anxiety.

"Zack is apt to keep late hours," he was beginning.

"Speak honestly, Mark Barneson, or say nothing," said she, interrupting him. "He is in the habit of absenting himself for nights and nights together from his father's roof; and you, his confederate, admit him before the

house is astir. What would my husband say, were he to know all this?"

"If reported to him, Mr. Lambert would disbelieve it, till it was proved; for he is just and impartial."

"And *I* am partial, Mark. For till I just now certified to myself the absence of my son, I gave no credit to the tale. But now that I find you here, waiting up through the watches of the night, to assist his misconduct—"

Young Barneson lost no time in placing before her eyes the sheet of paper covered with diagrams, on which the ink was scarcely dry.

"This is the occupation, ma'am, which keeps me from my rest," said he. "I should be misemploying the time which belongs to Mr. Lambert, were any portion of the day devoted to studies which may, nevertheless, at some future period, be made available to the firm. With respect to his son, though my influence over him is gone, I cannot tax my conscience with having ever employed it for an unworthy

purpose. His comings and goings are altogether independent of me. Had he asked my aid in the manner you suppose, I should have refused it."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Mrs. Lambert fervently. "I can't afford, Mark, to think ill of both of you." And tears which she evidently strove to repress, rolled down her cheeks.

Fain would the sympathising Mark have consoled her distress. But what comfort could he conscientiously bestow?

"You must help me, though you would not help *him*," said she, after a pause. "The person from whom I received my warning, will, if this mischief goes on, certainly apprise his father; and Matthew Lambert would be without pity. Matthew Lambert, who has led a good and righteous life, and who has a strong sense of parental authority, may perhaps turn the offender at once out of the house."

"I have remonstrated with Zack too often, ma'am, to have the least hope that my word

will prevail with him," replied Mark. "But a mother's voice—a *tender* mother's voice—might do much. Speak to him yourself. Place before him the ruinous nature of the course he is pursuing."

"But I know not *what* course he is pursuing—" faltered the unhappy mother. And Mark instantly perceived that he was going too far.

"The irregularity of your son's hours proves that he keeps bad company," said he, when again appealed to. "He is in debt—he is intemperate. Perhaps a timely admonition—"

"Too late—too late!"—murmured Mrs. Lambert. "There is but one chance for him—to be removed out of reach of the bad connections he has formed. He must leave home for a time. But to manage that, I must consult his father; and I dare not,—no, I *dare* not."

Mark Barneson longed to tell the unhappy

mother that half the evils in this world arise from deficiency of moral courage. But she was too miserable to be argued with. All he could do was to persuade her to retire quietly to rest, lest her husband, perceiving her absence, should have his attention called to that of his son. He promised to confer with her on the morrow, concerning the further means to be adopted.

But on the morrow, alas! his attention was fated to be engrossed by grievances of a more personal nature.

CHAPTER III.

From the period of Mark Barneson's disinheritance by his uncle, and self-exile from W., the affairs of the family had been progressing, as foretold by Chrissy, from bad to worse. The regiment of Captain Knowles having been ordered to India, his marriage with Maria was hastily patched up. And though the family of the gallant captain could not be brought to consider an allowance to the bride of one hundred per annum by any means a sufficient

motive for sanctioning the wedding with their presence, it was a concession hard to accomplish for the heavily-burthened apothecary.

His wife and daughters managed, however, to convince old Barneson that the honour of his family was at stake; and when, some months afterwards, a similar demand was made upon him in behalf of Anne and her lieutenant, though he candidly admitted the impossibility of doing for her more than half he had done for her sister, the additional fifty pounds a year was secured by the mortgage of his house and business.

But even with his family reduced to three daughters, and rigid economy, Barneson found it difficult to get on. If nothing succeeds like success, nothing impoverishes like poverty. The moment it was discovered that after the establishment in life of her two beauties, Mrs. Barneson prudently reduced her household, and ceased to give luncheons, it became equally apparent that "Barneson was getting in years,"

—that "Barneson's memory was failing,"—that "Barneson was a mere old woman." His patients deserted him for a young doctor who had fewer hairs on his chin than the poor old apothecary on his bald head; but who exhibited his name and diplomatic titles ostentatiously emblazoned on the brass plate of a well-varnished street-door, instead of painted in white capitals over a shop-window. But "it was old Barneson's own fault. Why had he not brought up one of his sons to succeed him in his business when he became too infirm to carry it on; instead of thrusting one hopeful into the army, and allowing that clumsy boy, of whom his Yorkshire relations could make nothing, to become a Brummagem nailer?"

It was Christina who bore the brunt of all these evils; who watched the face of her father grow thinner and more careworn; and felt the temper of her weak mother become sourer and sourer. But conscious that she was the main-

stay of the house, she undertook the work of the missing servants, and the education of the younger girls; corresponded cheerfully with her grumbling and disappointed sisters; endeavoured to undeceive the unauthorised pretensions of her soldier-brother; and to keep up the spirits of the laborious one, whom she regarded as the future guardian of the family.

It was to Mark that, with much compunction and many tears, she applied for a trifling assistance towards the household expenses which it was her function to regulate; and by thus emptying his reduced treasury, exposed him to the savage reproaches of Zack Lambert. And it was to him alone, she at length reluctantly confided her suspicions that her father, so far from being able to continue the allowance of two hundred and fifty pounds a-year due to his three elder children, was himself on the verge of bankruptcy.

"You were too proud to come here, dear

brother, for Maria's or Nancy's wedding," she wrote. "But though you shunned the house of feasting, the house of mourning has sacred claims. Mr. Lambert will not refuse you a week's holiday. Come as speedily as you can, and assist our poor father with your advice. He is breaking fast. My mother does nothing but fret and worry him. With your assistance, he might perhaps dispose of his business, which is rapidly falling off. At all events, your presence would be a support to us all."

To his power of affording material pecuniary assistance by the appropriation of his uncle's legacy to the family necessities, Chrissy made no allusion, because that question had been set at rest by Mr. Holden's widow, (now re-married to the attorney by whom his will was drawn up,) who declined to pay him a shilling before the attainment of his majority; or, long ago, the whole would have been sacrificed. Christina only asked for what he could certainly

afford, his counsel and kindness; and no sooner had he perused the letter, than with trembling hands, he flung a few clothes into a small valise, and prepared for departure. Of his master's consent, he was assured. His books were in perfect order. A junior clerk, his coadjutor, could efficiently supply his place.

But as he proceeded from the counting-house towards the foundry, where, at that hour, Mr. Lambert was sure to be found, it suddenly occurred to him that he was penniless. His half-year's salary, paid the preceding week, had been already forwarded to Chrissy; and unless Zack were prepared to re-imburse his advances, which, after the scene of the preceding night seemed impossible, he lacked even the means of reaching W.

And alas! he now remembered, what the startling news conveyed by Christina's letter had for a moment driven from his mind, that young Lambert, exceeding his usual irregu-

larity, had not yet returned home. The early post had surprised poor Mark still anxiously watching for his arrival.

But his need was imminent. He must not, from overstrained delicacy towards the Lamberts, neglect his duty towards his own family. Presenting himself, therefore, to the unhappy mother of Zack with as little ceremony as she had used towards himself the preceding night, he briefly confided to her his distress, and entreated her assistance.

Over-harassed and over-wearied, Mrs. Lambert could not at once realise the urgency of the case. All she seemed to understand was, that Zack was still absent; about to incur disgrace with his father,—perhaps in jeopardy, perhaps ill, perhaps in danger. It was only by placing his sister's letter in her hand, and thus violating what he regarded as a sacred family confidence, that he could bring her to understand his position; that his earnings were in the hands of her son; that he must

have funds to hasten to W. and protect the interests of his ruined father.

The already pale face of Mrs. Lambert became ghastly as she listened. Every shilling at her command had been gradually extorted from her by her prodigal son; till, like Mark himself, she was destitute. To procure the money requisite, she must either become herself a borrower, or reveal all to her husband. From Mark, situated as he was, she could ask no indulgence.

While she stood, pained and irresolute, the offending cause of her embarrassment burst into the room: his face haggard, his eyes seared with intemperance and exasperation. An unlucky encounter with his father had exposed him to such humiliating reproofs in presence of several workmen belonging to the establishment, above all, of Alick Ferrier, the Glasgow foreman, by whom, after many threatenings, he had been denounced to his parents, that he was in no mood for expostula-

tion. Even Mrs. Lambert was awed by the ferocious expression of his countenance.

To find Mark Barneson in his mother's room,—according to the habits of the house as inaccessible to one of her husband's clerks as the queen's chamber,—roused his suspicions that he was the subject of their conference. The open letter which Mrs. Lambert held in her hand, bore, he doubted not, reference to him or to his conduct. Snatching it from her without apology, he hastily cast his eyes over the contents. But as he read, the angry man became sober,—calm,—self-condemned. The truth rushed into his mind. Mark Barneson, attired for a journey, was there to beg for the means of reaching his afflicted home,—to beg for his own,—the hard-earned pittance of which he, the idler, the spendthrift, the drunkard, had deprived his generous friend.

Not a word did he utter, not a glance did he direct towards those who, a moment before,

had been the objects of his vindictive scowl. But, stalking through the open door, he went his way into the foundry-yard, where he had recently quitted his father all but resolved never to look upon his face again. There, yet stood old Lambert; his brows bent, his arms crossed behind his back; but his heart yearning with the compunctions of one who has deservedly chastised a favourite dog, whom he longs to caress in compensation. With Chrissy Barneson's letter half crushed in his hand, Zack boldly accosted him.

"Father," said he, regardless that Alick Ferrier stood sneeringly regarding him,—"you reprimanded me just now, and I answered you insolently. You told me I was vicious and worthless; and that if I continued in my evil ways, you would cast me out to starve. Forget what I said in vindication of myself. You were right, and I was wrong. I deserve to be cast out,—I deserve to starve. Punish me as you see fit, I won't complain. But do me this

justice. Pay Mark Barneson eighty pounds which I borrowed from him in such wise that it was all but theft. Pay it to him out of hand, that he may not lose an hour in hurrying to the relief of his distressed family; and I'll work my fingers to the bone, father, till I repay you, pound for pound, what you've advanced for my credit, and to save my heart from breaking."

Right glad was the old man thus fervently apostrophised, to bend his head over the letter which Zack had by this time placed in his hands, so as to conceal the tears that were gathering under his spectacles; and having mastered, or seemed to master the contents, he turned suddenly round, and desired Ferrier to send young Barneson to him in the counting-house. He considered perhaps that his son did not deserve the gratification of witnessing the accomplishment of his prayer.

Young Lambert was still standing absorbed in thought on the same spot, when ten minutes

afterwards, Mark, with his valise on his shoulder, touched him on the arm.

"Come with me to the coach-office, my dear Zack," said he. "Your father wants you to see me off." And haggard and exhausted as he was, the penitent young man complied, with the docility of a child.

"You have made my fortune," resumed Mark cheerfully, as they proceeded together along the crowded causeway. "Mr. Lambert has not only reimbursed your debt, but most generously presented me with a hundred pound-note, towards relieving the difficulties of my poor father."

"Not a farthing too much, old fellow," replied his friend, "to requite your zeal and services to the firm. I wish it were five hundred instead of one.

Had time and place been favourable, Mark might have endeavoured to convince him that this sudden effusion of liberality on the part of the old man, was a thank-offering to one who

had been the accidental cause of bringing him to a better understanding with his son.

But there was no time for further parley. Mark was just in time to clamber to the roof of an overladen day-coach, resembling in form and altitude a respectable haystack.

CHAPTER IV.

So many changes and zig-zags awaited him on his cross road, that only at daybreak the following day did Mark Barneson, and the morning mail, make their appearance at the gates of W. An early frost rendered the sky as clear as crystal; and how different looked those cold, square, silent cathedral towers from the reeking chimneys he had left behind! The engines and hammers of Birmingham had been stamping and clattering for hours;—its

furnaces a-glow,—its factory windows radiant with gas. But at W. nothing was astir but the rooks circling round the calm, grey towers; a few collegians with their satchels, and a few maids-of-all-work with their brooms.

Much as—thanks to prospective and retrospective grievances,—he disliked the place, Mark could not but regard with reverence the solemn, historical aspect of the venerable city.

Having hurried at a rapid pace from the coach-office to his father's door, the tranquillity around him struck him less favourably. From the closed shutters, it appeared as though some one lay dead in the house. And such might almost have been the case; so heavily afflicted was the poor old apothecary, and so deep the distress of his family.

Misfortunes had pressed rapidly upon them. On the very day that Christina's letter was despatched, an execution had been put into the house; and for so small a sum, that it was supposed to be at the private instigation

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of the brass-plated doctor. But even *he*, however envious, jealous, or designing, would scarcely have prompted the measure, could he have surmised that, though the claim was, within a few hours, paid off, grief and mortification would so work upon the impaired constitution of Barneson, that, in the course of the night, a paralytic seizure reduced him to the brink of the grave.

No further hope of pecuniary relief by disposing of his business! It had ceased to exist. The old man was henceforward to be a cipher. His days were numbered; and but for the opportune arrival of his son, very wretched would they have been, both to himself and to those who surrounded his dying bed.

It was in vain that Mark endeavoured to soothe the peevish outcries in which his childishness sought relief, by assuring him that the bailiffs had left the house, that he had brought the means of relieving the immediate necessi-

ties of the family, and that, within a week's time, the attainment of his majority would compel his uncle's executrix to disburse the long-coveted sum that was to place them at ease. The disabled intellect of the sufferer could not be brought to reason. He could not even be made to understand that the young stranger who addressed him so tenderly and tended him so kindly, was his son Mark.

"I had but two sons that I remember," muttered he, with a fatuous smile. "One of them my daughters drove away from W.: the other, I murdered!"

To explain to her startled brother the origin of this strange delusion, was the task of Christina. On perceiving his bankruptcy to be inevitable, the old man had uttered a frantic prayer that his beloved son Ned might fall honourably in action, rather than survive to witness the ruin and disgrace of his family. And, after his attack, the idea that his prayer had been granted, had taken possession of his

mind. It was in vain they assured him that his son was safe; that no despatches had arrived; and when, ten days after his death, the gazette of the battle of Toulouse actually contained in its list of killed and wounded the name of Ensign Edward Barneson, the shuddering marvel-mongers of W. chose to ascribe to a supernatural warning the ravings of his paralytic father.

The anguish, both mental and bodily, of the poor sufferer, served at least to reconcile his family to his release; and Christina and Mark, as they piously drew the last covering over his wasted face, were unable to echo the lamentations of the widow.

That nothing, or next to nothing, remained for her maintenance, was no surprise, either to her children or their fellow-towns people. It had long been predicted; and every ill-natured comment had been so thoroughly exhausted, that, for a change, people became compassionate, when it was discovered that, though the assets

of Mr. Barneson's estate amounted to little, his liabilities were scarcely more considerable; and that, like a witty *roué*, whose sayings have become proverbial, he had "muddled away his income in paying his debts." The defunct defaulter thenceforward became established as "poor Barneson," and *re*-established as an honest man.

His wife, the real origin of his difficulties, was the only person who considered herself aggrieved by his insolvency. But hers was not a grateful nature. For when, on the day of the funeral, her contemned son informed her that he was about to invest Mr. Holden's legacy in an annuity on her life, which, with thirty pounds a-year allowed her from his salary, would form a small provision for the remnant of her life, she indignantly resented his desire that the trifle remaining after the sale of his father's goods and the liquidation of his debts, should be allotted to his helpless sisters.

"Mark had no affection for her," she said. "He had been spoiled at Ryecroft Farm. He had never felt towards her like any other of her children."

Not satisfied, in short, with the real evils of her lot, she chose to become a victim; and by dint of pitying herself, contrived to enlist a host of sympathisers. Like all Cathedral towns, W. abounds in idle, kindly people, who delight in busy benevolence and the monstering of nothings. The Widow Barneson soon became one of the "shorn lambs" of its amiable gossips; and very universal was their cry of exultation when an opportune vacancy enabled them to offer her the matronship of St. Margaret's College,—one of the numerous charitable institutions of the ancient city:—an office which had always been held by decayed gentlewomen, as conferring a liberal salary, a comfortable residence, and duties of the lightest and simplest kind. A quieter or more creditable home could not

have been secured to the widow and orphans of "poor Barneson!"

Relieved from all anxiety on their account, Mark ventured, for the first time, to acquaint her with Christina's desire and determination to adopt the profession of governess:—at first, of course, in a humble degree; for in what are called accomplishments, she was sadly deficient.

Again, Mrs. Barneson resented. Again, she was ill used. If deserted by Christina, *who* was to undertake the education of her younger girls?

"The annuity proposed by Mark," she said, "fell naturally to her share, because purchased with her late brother's money. But she would rather renounce the increase to her income, prospectively tendered by Chrissy, than that it should be earned through disgracing her married sisters by slaving as a governess."

To render her a reasonable being, would have been a far harder task for Mark than to

wind up his father's affairs. It was afflicting to see how much deeper was her sorrow for the loss of the son in whom her pride and vanity were centred, than for that of the husband of her youth, her faithful, submissive partner for thirty struggling years ; and when, his duties fully accomplished, and his ungracious parent settled in her new abode, poor Mark took his departure from W. to resume his life of labour at Birmingham, sore was his heart at leaving poor Chrissy to be the victim of her mother's peevish repinings. On arriving at the factory, (so much more his home than any roof, save that of Ryecroft Farm, which had ever covered his head,) he found that the long leave of absence so liberally accorded him, had brought forth good fruit. Zack had made it a point of honour to adhere closely to business while the prop of the firm was away. Not a fault was to be found with him. Not a cloud had darkened the horizon of Lambert and Co. ; by

whom the sad-faced clerk, in his mourning suit, was affectionately welcomed.

The gazette had apprised the Lamberts of Ned Barneson's untimely end. But they chose to hear in minute detail the prospects of the surviving family. All that Mark had undergone, they spared him. All he purposed to undergo, they applauded. And when he announced the intentions of his sister to seek a situation as governess, and her capability to impart the elements of a plain English education, he was promptly reminded how long Mrs. Lambert had been in want of such an assistant.

"I only wish," said the old man, kindly, "that you'd written from W. to apprise us, and brought her home with you at once."

It was settled, however, that, at the close of the Christmas holidays, Christina was to be among them. A cheering prospect for Mark; whose spirits were greatly depressed by the scenes he had witnessed, and the burthens he had adopted. With him, Chrissy would be

safe. With Chrissy, he should be happy. He could have wished that their tent had been set up in a more healthful and pleasant spot. The young girl might perhaps pine in that noxious atmosphere and stagnant household, after her airy, dignified, native city, — the anthems of its old cathedral,—the breezes of its wholesome downs. But his affection, and the kindness of the Lamberts, would reconcile her to the sacrifice. The path of duty that lay before the brother and sister might have been appointed in a far more briary land.

CHAPTER V.

The generous dealing of Matthew Lambert seemed likely to reap a plenteous harvest. By the opening of the Continent consequent on the pacification of Europe, the business of the firm was doubled, and the engines of Lambert and Co. soon acquired a world-wide reputation. In spite of the opposition of Ferrier, the counsels of Mark Barneson assumed a preponderating influence, not only in the adjustment of their pecuniary affairs, but in

the adoption of every improvement produced by the development of mechanical science. Matthew Lambert was a prudent, practical man. But there were discoveries undreamed of in the philosophy of his earlier days, which Mark, a careful reader as well as ready reckoner, earnestly and successfully pressed upon his attention. Before Waterloo was fought, the premises of the Bracknell Works were considerably augmented, and their furnaces reconstructed. Lambert and Co. were already cited among the first civil engineers in the kingdom.

On the other hand, the private affairs of the young clerk kept pace with those of his employers. His mother wrote more cheerfully. Her married daughters, who at first appeared to resent their father's ruin as an injury done to themselves, were becoming resigned to their disappointment. They even grew affectionate towards herself, on finding that she made no appeal to their generosity, and that their

uncouth brother had undertaken to be care-keeper to the family.

Christina, too, had been singularly successful in attaching the hearts of the little knitters of comforters. Reared in habits of seclusion, and accustomed only to the reserved manners of their parents and kinsfolk, the frank deportment of their young governess exercised a peculiar charm over Lettice and Rhoda.

All, in short, would have been peace and comfort, if perfect happiness were for this world. But Mark, though rejoicing that a radical change appeared to have been wrought in the nature of Zack Lambert,—that he was becoming as sober and homestaying as he had once been wild and prodigal,—was not at ease respecting the origin of this sudden reformation. His mind misgave him that if the family meals and family fireside appeared less wearisome than of old, it was only because the intelligent countenance of Christina, in

attendance on her pupils, imparted brightness to the dreary spot.

More than one motive rendered the conjecture unsatisfactory. The Lamberts were dissenters; and Matthew was an elder of his church. As his wife undertook the religious tuition of their daughters, it was immaterial that their governess should belong to the established church; but he was not the man to sanction the marriage of his only son out of the pale of his own.

This was not all. Though the habits of Zack were changed, his nature was unaltered; and it was not to a libertine at heart,—a brute, when under the influence of intemperance,—that Mark was disposed to confide the happiness of his sister. That her affections might be touched by the attentions of one who, though prepossessing in his exterior, was in nature coarse and unlettered, he entertained no fear. In their Sunday walks to church and back to the Works — the only oppor-

tunity the brother and sister enjoyed of being alone together,—he ascertained that Christina's thoughts were still absorbed by the precarious fortunes of her family. If she ever looked beyond her present life of anxious exertions, it was to a quiet country home where she and Mark, having earned a moderate independence, might live together, as old bachelor and old maid; with flocks, and flowers, and books, and time and place at their disposal; all that the din and smoke of Birmingham, or the cold gentilities of W., were likely to enhance.

During the first half-year of Christina Barneson's sojourn with the Lamberts, her deep mourning and depression of spirits prevented her noticing the dulness of their interior. The Lamberts lived comfortably—almost luxuriously; but not a stranger was ever entertained within their gates. Their notion of the duties of society consisted in exchanging occasional visits with a few distant relations, like themselves, engaged in trade and belong-

ing to their sect, by which, public entertainments were accounted sinful.

But in time, youth and nature resumed their sway; and after a twelvemonth's round of work, study, and religious exercises, Chrissy was less amazed at young Lambert's frequent absence. His absence or presence, indeed, was alike a source of vexation. The only wrangles she had ever heard in the house, arose from his dissensions with his parents; and when he was away, her attention was often distracted from the books with which, after the little girls were in bed, she endeavoured to complete her imperfect education, by the lamentations of Mrs. Lambert over the backslidings of Zack.

Great, therefore, was her surprise, when, one evening, Mrs. Lambert imparted to her confidentially over her knitting, a project suggested by Ferrier, which she trusted would break off the injurious companionships of her son. As the bearing of heavy burthens is said to invigorate the human frame, his father

hoped that, by increasing his responsibilities, he might be able to strengthen his character.

Christina looked up from her volume with some curiosity, as to the mode in which the miracle was to be accomplished.

"You have probably heard from your brother," continued Mrs. Lambert, "that the engines ordered by the great sugar-refiner at Hâvre-de-Grâce, which have compelled us to employ ever since spring so many extra hands, are at last ready for delivery. Ferrier was to have accompanied them, and to remain in France as overseer of the works. But he has suggested that Zack has sufficient experience for the job; or, if not, that Pierce and Drever, and one or two other hands, might assist him. In short, he is of opinion the change might be beneficial to my son. A few months' absence would give a new turn to his thoughts."

"A new turn, perhaps; but every change is not beneficial," observed Chrissy returning to her book. That it would probably be a

change from bad to worse, was tacitly implied.

"Have you any grounds for objecting to the plan?" inquired Mrs. Lambert, drily.

"Objecting, ma'am?" repeated Chrissy surprised, "when I have neither influence nor interest in the question? I cannot help thinking, however," she added, evading all allusion to the moral side of the dilemma, "that knowing nothing of the French language, your son would make a less efficient representative of the firm than some person better qualified—"

"Your brother, perhaps?"

"My brother," replied Chrissy, unguardedly; "who, though he may not speak French fluently, understands and writes it to perfection."

Mrs. Lambert laid down her knitting for a moment, and gazed wonderingly at her companion. What was passing in her mind, however, was not pourtrayed in her inexpressive countenance. She was thinking "if it be as

Alick Ferrier supposes, if this young girl is really bent upon entangling Zack in a foolish marriage and advancing the interests of her brother, she would never thus expose her plans."

Her notion was confirmed, when, a moment afterwards, and without the slightest embarrassment, Christina added—"Besides, I very much doubt, ma'am, if your son would consent to the arrangement. He is so averse to foreigners, and so prejudiced against foreign parts!"—

"I should hardly imagine, however," said Mrs. Lambert, coldly, "that Zack would venture to oppose the will of his father. He may be wild, Miss Barneson; but whatever you may fancy to the contrary, he knows his duty."

Christina had often heard her assert the reverse. But it was not her business to convict her patroness of inconsistency; and Mr. Lambert made his appearance at supper-time in a mood

so serene, that it was plain his project had experienced no opposition. But he was unaccompanied by his son; and the meal would have passed in silence, but for a few inquiries on the part of Mark Barneson concerning the period fixed for Ferrier's departure, and the mode of shipping the ponderous machinery, which required three powerful teams for its transportation. It struck him that his old master's replies were cold and constrained. No sooner had Mrs. Lambert withdrawn for the night, than the mystery was expounded. The plans devised by Ferrier for Zack's expatriation, were unfolded as a settled arrangement.

Mark was both startled and distressed. He had been designedly kept in the dark. Ferrier was too sure of his opposition to risk the premature development of his scheme. He did not, however, expostulate; for his advice was not asked.

"If my son starts a week hence," observed

the old man, "he will be in time to meet the brig we have engaged at Southampton. In that space, he will have learned from Ferrier and yourself all that is necessary—eh, Mark?" added he, after a pause, perceiving that he obtained no answer.

"Certainly not, Sir,—nor in thrice the time. You do not ask my opinion on other points of the question; or I should take the liberty of adding that, whether as regards your son or yourself, nothing could be more injudicious."

"If I have not asked your opinion you might have spared giving it," said Matthew Lambert, morosely. "I have my motives for removing that thoughtless young fellow from Birmingham; as you have perhaps yours for wishing to keep him here."

"Motives?" reiterated Mark, not a little hurt by a tone and manner so unusual. "What motives can I possibly have, Sir, but such as I am willing to explain?—namely, that your

son is totally unacquainted with the working department of your business, addicted to expensive pleasures, and that, if deputed by yourself to represent the firm of Lambert and Co. in a foreign country, you render yourself responsible for whatever liabilities he may incur."

"That is *my* look out. Entanglements may result from his remaining at home, much harder to throw off than the loss of a few hundreds of pounds."

"The hundreds, Sir, might be thousands."

"In short, Mark Barneson, it suits you that he should bide in Birmingham!"

"It does indeed, Sir."

"In order that, from sheer idleness and weariness, he may be hood-winked into a marriage with your sister!"—

Mark started to his feet.

"You find I am better informed than you fancied," added the old man, — who had been gradually working himself into a state

of exasperation, prompted in the first instance by the treacherous suggestions of Alick Ferrier.

"Let us sleep upon it, Mr. Lambert!" replied Mark, having succeeded in repressing the first indignant rejoinder that rose to his lips. "If I answered you to-night, I might forget the respect due to one to whom I and mine are under such heavy obligations."

"That pretence won't serve you, Mark Barneson," cried the angry old man. "Evasion won't do. You know as well as *I* do, *now*, and as every soul in the Bracknell Works has known for months, that you and your sister have been playing into each other's hands to——"

"Stop, Sir—I beg of you to stop!" cried Mark, panting for breath. "You have been imposed upon; and when undeceived, your kind heart will suffer for having insulted two persons so helpless and friendless as Chrissy and myself."

Matthew Lambert could not repress an impatient gesture.

"Is your son in the house?" inquired Mark, his temper again warming. "Let me go in search of him."

"In order to sow seeds of discord between us, and dispose him against accepting the duty I have imposed upon him?"—

"No, Mr. Lambert;—in order that he may vindicate two friends unjustly aspersed. With all his faults, Zack has a generous nature; and would tell the truth, however injurious to himself."

"And what, young man, is *your* version of the truth?" demanded Lambert, a little moved by the warmth exhibited by his usually reserved clerk.

"Simply that my sister has already, more than once, rejected your son's proposal to make her his wife."

"Christina Barneson refuse to—No, no!" cried old Lambert, interrupting himself, "that

would be too good a joke—That—But Ferrier warned me you would say as much, or more."

"With Alick Ferrier's insinuations, sir, I have nothing to do. I refer you explicitly to your son. Had not this mortifying dispute occurred between us, I should have announced to you, this very night, my sister's desire to resign her employment in your family. Not alone," added Mark, "because it is harassing to her to be placed in such a false position; but because Ferrier himself, instead of accepting as final the refusal she gave him last winter to marry him, molests her with letters, and is perpetually intercepting her walks with her pupils. But for her attachment to your daughters, and her gratitude to Mrs. Lambert, Christina would have retired, months ago, from the house."

"I have your solemn word, Mark Barneson, in attestation of all this?"—

"If you doubt me, sir, apply to Zack. Or send for my sister, who is probably still up."

"No, Barneson," replied the old man, in an enfeebled voice, apparently overcome by all he had been hearing. "Let us do even as you proposed. Let us sleep upon it. To-morrow, I must have further explanations with Ferrier—with yourself—with my son."

It was probably with his wife that the old man took counsel, before he again confronted his subordinate. For, in woman, faith is more instinctive than in the rougher sex; and Mrs. Lambert had from the first believed in Mark and his sister, whom she reverenced as "children of light."

As soon as the ringing of the dinner-bell cleared the yard and the counting-house for a time, the head of the firm of Lambert and Co. despatched a messenger for Barneson; and, for the first time since their greeting on his return from W., offered him his hand.

"I ask your pardon, young man," said he. "I spoke hastily last night,—worse than hastily,

—unadvisedly and uncharitably. I ask your pardon, Mark. Let us be friends again."

"We have never ceased to be so, sir. Towards *you*, I could never feel otherwise than respectfully and gratefully," replied Mark, more deeply moved than he cared to show. "You have, I trust, satisfied yourself that I asserted only the truth. But far rather than hear you say so, would I learn that you had renounced your intentions concerning your son's visit to Hâvre. Let Christina's remaining here be no obstacle or object. I pledge myself for her immediate departure."

"That observation, Mark, is scarcely grateful or respectful," replied old Matthew, "considering that you know how dearly your sister is loved by my wife and girls. But, on that point, be easy. I have thought the matter over. I have talked it over with my wife; and his mother and I have come to a determination that if, on his return from France, our son should persist in his liking, and have made

proof there of as much steadiness as could warrant our establishing him in life, Christina shall become our daughter-in-law."

At this startling announcement, the countenance of Mark became more clouded than it had been at any moment of their stormy discussion of the preceding night. The duty of candidly stating what he knew would inflict pain and mortification on his benefactor, was not, however, to be evaded.

"It would be unpardonable to deceive you, sir," said he; "but the marriage you generously propose is impossible. Under no circumstances would Chrissy be happy as the wife of your son. Such is her opinion—such is mine."

"Is she discontented, then, among us?" demanded the old man,—but more in sorrow than in anger. "I fancied she was attached to the family!"

"And so she is. She loves her master and mistress; she loves her pupils; she is per-

fectly happy here; but to fulfil the duties of a governess is a very different thing from undertaking those of a wife. In the first place, she belongs to the Church of England"—

"The prospect of a happy home would perhaps determine her to conform to our belief."

"You cannot in your heart desire it, Mr. Lambert," said Mark, gravely. "You would despise her if worldly considerations influenced her religious opinions."

"She is attached, perhaps, to Alick Ferrier? My wife tells me"—

"That he has asked her to be his wife, and that she has more than once declined the offer."

"She might do worse than marry him," rejoined Matthew Lambert, fractiously. "Ferrier is steady and pains-taking. He has laid by money: he is getting on. I have a sincere regard for Ferrier."

So had not Mark. But, conscious that he

had already opposed and thwarted his master more than comported with their relative position, he deferred to a future time the explanation of his sister's objections. But on raising his eyes from the ground, after listening respectfully to the manifesto of his commander-in-chief, he perceived that Zack had been an unobserved auditor of the latter portion of their conference.

"I have been seeking you all over the place, Sir," said he, addressing his father, in a hurried, agitated manner. "I am anxious to tell you that, on reflection, I am ready to obey your orders. I am prepared to start for Southampton. I will do my best, my *very* best, as supervisor of the works at Hâvre de Grâce."

CHAPTER VI.

The weeks that followed his departure, though summer was in its prime,—and during the summer season the Lamberts refreshed themselves for the year, not after the usual Great-British custom of rushing to the sea-side, but by nesting themselves in a farm-house which they had rented for some years past, on the Dudley road,—passed far from pleasantly to Mark and his sister. They were evidently out of favour. Constraint and dissatisfaction prevailed between them and their employers.

That Ferrier was in a great measure the cause of the misunderstanding, they nothing doubted. But of him, at Whortle Hill, Christina saw no more; and young Barneson was too well aware of his ability and experience in his vocation, to seek a quarrel on personal grounds. The indispensable intercourse of business was formally kept up between them. It would be Alick Ferrier's own fault if he provoked further hostilities.

Of the absent son, no mention was made at Whortle Hill. Even at the Works, nothing transpired; except that the arrival of the machinery and men had been duly notified to the firm of Lambert and Co., by that of Questier et Compagnie, and that Bill Drever, one of the hands who accompanied the consignment, had written home to his wife a flourishing account of the notice their monster engine had excited in the docks; as well as of the cheapness and cheerfulness of life in the French Liverpool.

"So much the better!" said Mark, when the good news was communicated to him. But at heart, he remained anxious.

Letters bearing the Hâvre post-mark, constantly appeared in the box of the Bracknell Works. But though mostly in Zack's handwriting, not one was addressed to his father or mother. Alick Ferrier was the favoured correspondent.

It was this undutiful silence, perhaps, which indisposed them towards Christina; whom they regarded as the cause of dissension between them and their son, and of his temporary exile. But their reserve only caused her to fall back with warmer sympathy on the affection of her pupils, two hopeful girls, who fully repaid her care.

In a different guise and degree however. Lettice, now in her thirteenth year, was dull and slow, almost to deficiency. But she was fondly attached to her instructress; and pacified Christina's rebukes by a silent caress,

or admitted her faults by a tearful blush; while Rhoda, handsome, brilliant, spirited, but in manner abrupt, and in temper untameable, stimulated by her rapid acquirements the utmost industry of her teacher.

On the Sunday visits of Mark to Whortle Hill, he was sometimes inclined to accuse poor Chrissy of over-interest in their progress, and exaggerated admiration of the beautiful features of Rhoda, and sweet countenance of Lettice. She seemed to think more of the Lambert children than of her two poor sisters at W. But even when, as they were sauntering together through the meadows one gorgeous July evening, he let fall some hint of his family jealousy, she was too wise to vindicate herself. It would but have vexed him the more to learn that she refrained from communicating to him the letters of her mother and sisters, because they consisted chiefly of unreasonable grumblings or appeals to her purse; or that the strong resemblance of Rhoda Lambert to that

absent brother, who, for her sake, was eating the bitter bread of banishment, had no small share in her predilection.

"But since you are so anxious about your friend," said she, when, as they crossed the dewy meadows on their return to Whortle Hill, Mark still continued to harp upon certain mysterious hints he had received from Ferrier, touching the proceedings of the absent Zack, "why not write to him yourself?—Why not write to him at once?"—

"Do you suppose I have waited thus long? I wrote to him a month ago.—I have written thrice since.—Not a word in reply!"

"Yet you parted on friendly terms?"

"As friendly as could be expected, under the circumstances. He shook hands warmly with me when I bad him good bye; but refused his father's offer that I should accompany him to Southampton and see him off. He preferred the company of Ferrier."

"Naturally, just then. He knew that

you had advised me against becoming his wife."

"As any other brother of right principles would have done. But Zack is not of an unforgiving temper. I wish he were safe back again, Chrissy,—I wish he were safe back again! Before I leave you to-night, couldn't you ask Mrs. Lambert whether she has any tidings of her son? A word or two from *her* would be a great relief to my mind."

Christina shook her head. She could not venture on such tender ground. The silence maintained towards her on the subject was too pointed. It was only by restricting herself to the exact duties of her place in the family, that she could hope to keep on good terms with the Lamberts. In time, she trusted to win them back to their former kindness.

But though unwilling to risk a direct inquiry, she could not help watching the countenance of Mrs. Lambert for indications of anxiety or discomfort. She fancied that her

department, usually cold and sedate, evinced symptoms of agitation whenever the post came in. If foreign letters were expected, they certainly never made their appearance; and Lettice's frequent inquiry, at meal-times, of— "when brother Zack was coming home again?" were checked or reproved rather than answered.

Summer waned. A rainy autumn set in. The Lamberts migrated, as usual, from their cheerful grange to the noisy, sooty, smoky Works; and Christina did not find her dreary, high-walled quarters at the Foundry improved by the gloomy countenance of old Lambert, or the anxious looks of her brother.

A few days after their return, it was suddenly announced that Mr. Lambert was about to visit Havre, in order to supervise the completion of the works at Questier's Sugar Refinery, and negociate their balance of accounts. Nothing very startling in such a proceeding; except to those sufficiently acquainted with

the business of the firm to be aware of the far more important contracts in progress at the Bracknell Works, and old Matthew's utter ignorance of the language and habits of the country he was about to visit. Though he said not a syllable to Barneson touching the motives or probable duration of his expedition to France, the solemnity of his manner when depositing in his hands a considerable credit, and instructing him to undertake, during his absence, the entire charge of the Works and the family, filled the young man with consternation.

Instead of feeling grateful for the confidence reposed in him, Mark Barneson longed to fall on the neck of his old master, and exclaim—"Trust me less, or trust me more!—Why are you leaving us?—What has happened?—Is the Prodigal we love already feeding swine in a land of strangers?"—

He did, however, only what is usually done by civilised beings under similar circumstances:

bowed stiffly, coughed down the choking in his throat, and held his peace. It was not for an indigent clerk to pry into the mysteries of his master's house.

Shortly after the old gentleman's departure, however, it came incidentally to his knowledge that he had been himself instrumental in the movement. A poor woman, the wife of Bill Drever, one of the absent workmen, had appealed to his assistance to obtain an interview with the head of the firm; and finding that she had been harshly expelled from the yard by order of Ferrier, and concluding from her distressed appearance that her object was to obtain an advance of her husband's wages, or some other pecuniary concession, he had afforded her access to Mr. Lambert; to whom she had tidings to convey which curdled the very blood in his veins. The ragged, crumpled, ill-written, ill-spelt letter from her husband, which she placed in his hand, satisfied old Matthew that nothing but his immediate presence

could rescue from destruction, perhaps from death, his profligate but still dearly-loved son.

Even to his wife, however, he confided only half his terrors. But though he tried to look and speak cheerfully when, at parting, he bestowed his blessing on her and his children, the old man's heart was heavy as lead. All seemed desolate before him,—all hopeless. For many a long year, he had not absented himself from his family; and it was like tearing himself up by the roots to leave home. All would go wrong during his absence. As regarded the main object of his journey, he was probably already too late for his intervention to be available.

By the time he reached the first halting-place of his journey, however, the usual effects of travel in company with strangers, began to influence his mind. When forced to reply to promiscuous questioning and confront the stare of unsympathising faces, his brow became less clouded, and his tongue was loosed. Frost

had set in. The weather was sharp and sunny; and his fellow-travellers chanced to be cheery and communicative. The old man, whose views of life were cramped by the urgent nature of his business and the routine of his uneventful fireside, was almost bewildered by the topics of national interest which he heard argued, and the eagerness of his companions concerning men, things, and discoveries, hitherto undreamed of in his philosophy. The world he lived in, and the times he lived in, seemed suddenly to expand before him. He grew almost cheerful, as he listened in wondering silence to the discussion of Church and State, Commerce and Agriculture, handled with a degree of off-hand recklessness and vehement assertion, unknown to his drowsy chimney-corner.

The Hâvre packet was not to sail till the following day, at noon; and, in the interim, the clear atmosphere of the airy, busy town of Southampton, did its part in lightening his

depression. As yet untransformed by the magic of steam-locomotion by sea and land into a commercial port, Hampton was still the venerable rural capital of Sir Bevois; as proud of its noble Avenue, and picturesque Bar, as now of its Docks or Pier; and by the time the careworn iron-master descended the landing stairs to the deck of the good sailing packet, the Curlew, about to convey him to the "pleasaunte lande of Fraunce," his face and feelings were unconsciously revived by the sea breezes which, for more years than he could remember, had not braced his frame.

The highly-cultivated shores of the Southampton Water presented many a pleasant landscape. The wind was in their favour; and as they reached the Solent, the white sea-birds came circling round their sails, dotting the blue and pellucid waves that sparkled gaily in the sunshine. So bright, so auspicious was the scene, that joy entered into his heart. It *could* not be as, the preceding day, he had

dreaded. The young man, his son, was yet alive. The young man his son, was not so utter a castaway as he had been denounced by Bill Drever in that officious letter to his wife!—

The Ancient Mariner, when the dead albatross fell from his neck, could scarcely have felt more relieved than poor old Matthew, when his heart opened to that dawning hope: the returning Dove was not more welcome to the Ark!—

CHAPTER VII.

The waves were lapping vigorously against the quay on which Matthew Lambert landed, the following morning, under the guidance of the *commissionnaire* to whose care he had been thoughtfully consigned by the captain of the Curlew. Dazzled by the sunshine, puzzled by the clamour of a strange tongue and innumerable voices, harassed by the screaming of parrots and barking of dogs, which at Hâvre beset more shrilly than in most foreign ports

the stranger in the land, he might not otherwise have found his way to the shabby inn called the American Hotel; where only, in those days, what was *called* the "Anglis tongue" was spoken.

Dizzy from the influence of his voyage, and the noise of the touters and porters through whom he had struggled, he was at first unable to recall the object of his finding himself in that strange room,—bright with looking-glasses, coloured prints, the wood-fire flaming on its hearth, and the sunshine glaring through its windows; and the smiling chattering chambermaid in her high-crowned Norman cap, and assiduous waiter in his white apron and gold earrings, still further perplexed him with their tenders of service. But ten minutes of rest and refreshment having restored him to his accustomed sedateness and self-mastery, he was ready to start when the vehicle bespoken by Louis, his mulatto henchman, (whose polyglot accomplishments produced a strange

confusion of tongues,) jangled to the door, to transport him to the "*Raffinerie de Monsieur Questier;*" an establishment, he was informed by hostess, waiter, chambermaid, and the dingy *commissionnaire,* as well known in Hâvre as the *Préfecture* or the *Mairie.*

Even when, with Louis mounted on the box beside the ragged coachman, he jogged along through the crowded streets, the happy presentiments of his heart did not desert him. Things could not be so bad as the Drevers had described them. In that prosperous cheerful city, evil could not await him. At all events, he was there to provide a remedy: with money, to relieve difficulties; with clemency, to forgive them; with kindliness, to comfort sickness; with counsel, to subdue remorse. His son should accompany him back to England; should be no longer tied down to so tedious a routine of business, or so unsocial a home. Zack had, perhaps, been driven to vulgar excesses by the strict bounds

of his compulsory duties. A little sunshine admitted into his path would soften his nature, and brighten his intellects. Matthew Lambert was prepared to be both liberal and forgiving. His own heart and mind were, in fact, unwittingly expanding.

Arrived at the *Raffinerie*, he could not but admire the cleanliness and order of the court-yard, which, detached from the *Fabrique*, contained the dwelling-house of the MM. Questier. Under other circumstances, his first impulse would have been to visit the Works, and ascertain whether his own share in their improvements had been executed to his satisfaction. All he now desired was to obtain the address of his son, to whom his letters had been always addressed "to thé care of Questier et Cie."

On despatching the inquiry into the house, accompanied by the card of Lambert and Co., he was immediately requested to accord to Monsieur Questier the favour of an interview;

and not a little trying to his feelings was the delay produced by his compliance.

The gaudy saloon into which he was ushered, enriched with gay hangings of yellow silk and flowered muslin, fragrant with hyacinths, and including in its luxurious furniture a fine piano by Erard, jarred as completely against his notions of the mode of life appropriate to the manufacturing class, as against the yearnings of paternal anxiety. Harassed and peevish, he paced the Aubusson carpet, the beauty of whose texture and colours was lost upon him; unconsciously reviling the vanities so little in accordance with his own vexation of spirit.

It was some consolation when at length the door unclosed to admit his host, to find in Monsieur Questier a grave, middle-aged man; the saddened expression of whose face was completely in unison with his feelings. After a civil greeting, and the exchange of a phrase or two, which served to prove to each

that they should need an interpreter, the *commissionnaire* was summoned. But the few minutes that intervened, sufficed to throw a damp upon the sanguine hopes of poor Lambert. A certain stern solemnity in the countenance of the old Frenchman, implied that bad news awaited him.

"He is dead,—my poor son is no more! Ask him. Don't palter with me; make him tell you at once!" faltered he, clutching the arm of the astonished Louis, the moment he entered the room.

But though, long before the answer was translated to him, the negative gesture of Questier had satisfied the agonised father that his apprehensions were premature, the information transmitted to him was not of an alleviative nature.

"The young man is still alive, though in a condition all but hopeless," said Monsieur Questier, with deep concern. "It is his unfortunate adversary who is dead." And so

startled was the *commissionnaire* on finding his respectable-looking employer to be the parent of a ruffian whose misdeeds were affording matter of consternation to the whole city of Hâvre, that he had scarcely presence of mind to support to a seat the horror-stricken old father of Zack Lambert.

"Could I have guessed that he was so unprepared for the disclosure," whispered Questier to the *commissionnaire*, "I should have been more cautious. But immediately after the fatal conflict, I wrote to England; and, having subsequently received a warning from one of Mr. Lambert's English workmen that my letter might possibly fail to reach his hands, I despatched the man himself, viâ Dieppe, to Birmingham, to bear the sad tidings to his family. Our own packet had unluckily sailed on the very day of that disastrous event."

But when duly interpreted to him, Matthew Lambert lent no ear to these explanations. The past was nothing; the present

everything. His son, albeit a homicide, albeit, perhaps, an assassin, still lived. "*Where* was his son?"

The question was readily, though far from satisfactorily answered.

"In the hands of Criminal Justice. In a public hospital."

A *procès verbal*, drawn up by the *Procureur du Roi* a few hours after the catastrophe, in the low tavern where the fatal conflict had taken place, decreed the arrest of the survivor, and his removal to a place of security; and, still insensible, Zack Lambert was conveyed to the infirmary of the public prison, with the life-blood of a fellow-creature scarcely dry upon his hands. He and the loose companion with whom, under the excitement of drink, he had engaged in fight, had each defended himself according to the impulse of national habit; the one with the power and brutality of a prize-fighter, the other stabbing him in return. — One was dead;

the other, dying. But it behoved the Authorities of Justice to hold the survivor, so long as life remained, a hostage for his crime.

"Let me go to him—I must see my son—" said Lambert, rising with difficulty from his seat, as soon as the sad history was fully unfolded.

"That will not be so easy," was Monsieur Questier's reply. "We shall have to undergo a variety of forms, before such an interview can be accomplished. The prisoner is *en réclusion*. An order from the mayor, countersigned by the *Procureur du Roi*, must in the first instance be obtained. I have the honour to be well known to both, and will readily accompany you to make the declarations indispensable to such an indulgence. But alas! my dear sir, at this hour of the day, the *Procureur du Roi* is in attendance at the *Palais de Justice*, and *Monsieur le Maire* presiding in the Chamber of Commerce."

"The poor gentleman entreats, Monsieur

Questier, that you will at least make the attempt," interposed Louis, after having Englished the explanation. But finding that the wealthy member of the Town council of Hâvre, better versed than the *commissionnaire* in the difficulties and etiquettes of the case, still demurred, old Lambert tottering towards him, upraised his clasped hands and tearful eyes, with such a gesture of despairing supplication, that further hesitation was impossible. They were speedily on their way to the *Palais de Justice ;* and Louis, who, from his position on the box, was unable to perceive how utterly the old Englishman was stupified by his grief, trusted, as they crossed a drawbridge where a band of chained *galériens*, in their parti-coloured dress of yellow and black, were working at the reparation of the bastions, that their miserable plight had not attracted the notice of the unfortunate man, whose son might shortly find himself similarly degraded; unless, indeed, condemned to the

still more ignominious penalty of the guillotine.

Near the portico of the *Palais de Justice*, Monsieur Questier quitted the *fiâcre*, to proceed on his errand; leaving Lambert under the charge of Louis, to await his return. But to wait, what a measure of patience was required! The day, a short December day, was wearing on; and from bright and bracing, had become gloomy as the nipping air of a winter evening could render it. The heartbroken father sat shuddering with cold;—blind to what was passing around him,—deaf to all but the still small voice within, the cry of nature in his heart. How different from the sanguine man who had stepped that morning on shore, from the deck of the Curlew!—

The occasional whisper of Louis, as he intruded his head into the carriage, to ascertain whether the poor old gentleman had not lapsed into insensibility, of "Don't fret, sir, don't fret; M. Questier will soon be coming back," ceased

to affect him. He seemed resigned to remain shivering there till doomsday: without movement,—without sensation,—without hope!—

At length, just as the gathering darkness rendered his approach imperceptible, Monsieur Questier verified the promises of the mulatto, by hurrying into the coach, the driver of which he had previously directed to drive to the *château*, or prison; volubly explaining to his passive companion, as they drove along, that, with much pains, he had accomplished his mission; had seen and conquered the "constituted authorities,—*Procureur du Roi*, *Maire*, *Juge d'Instruction-Criminelle*, — everybody — everybody." And though his warmly accented language was wholly unintelligible to the bewildered stranger, the papers he held in his hand spoke for themselves: printed forms, filled up, signed, countersigned, stamped, and restamped, after the fashion of official mandates. —The "open Sesame" was obtained.

At the iron-knobbed low-browed door, whose

wicket was flanked with sentry boxes, the soldiers belonging to which were tramping backwards and forwards, their steps ringing on the frozen stones, to prevent their being frozen to their posts, the order of admittance was referred to the *Gardien*, through a small grating. Again, a delay of nearly a quarter of an hour, that it might be forwarded for the *visâ* of the *Commandant;* and the worthy sugar-refiner, unapt in his punctual routine of business to meet with such obstructions, and who was not only hungry and cold, but, in his capacity of a *bon bourgeois* and unimpeachable citizen, a little scandalised by his errand and out of sorts with his *protégé*, began to manifest signs of impatience.

But they were speedily suppressed. A sob, which in the darkness broke from the corner of the carriage,—a sob which, had daylight still prevailed, the distressed father would probably have found fortitude to suppress, —renewed the Christian sympathies of his

companion. Though so fortunate as to possess only daughters, "charming, good, dutiful daughters," he could understand what must be the torture of sorrowing over a dying son,—even though the inmate of a prison.

Another moment, and they were admitted, side by side, into the precincts of that gloomy fortress; and, after traversing a corridor, lighted at intervals by dimly-burning lamps, found themselves in a small chamber, or office, where they were required to sign their names, and certify their age, condition, and place of abode; all the trivialities which, in a moment of grief or suspense, appear so bitterly vexatious.

But even after explaining with difficulty to the inexperienced foreigner what was required of him, a new obstacle arose. Access to the prisoner Number 34 of the accident ward, was denied by the *Infirmier de service.* "Number 34 had that morning undergone an operation; and the *Sœur* in attendance on him, had it in

charge from the visiting surgeons, that he should be left undisturbed till their return. Number 34 must neither speak, nor be spoken to."

"But this gentleman does not want him to speak," pleaded Questier, earnestly. "This gentleman is his father; arrived from England for the sole purpose of beholding him before he dies!—"

"The more reason, sir, that an interview so agitating to the sick man, should be avoided. We are responsible for the life of Number 34 to the justice of the country, and he is in a most critical state."

"Yet you would deny to his grey-headed parent the consolation of seeing him for the last time!—"

"Our orders sir, are imperative. We have only to obey."

"All that now remains for us then," cried Monsieur Questier, shrugging his shoulders, and evidently much chagrined, "is to apply

for the intervention and authority of the English Consul. We must end where we ought to have begun."

Matthew Lambert, who had been gazing in dumb stupor upon the interlocutors, now began to understand from their movements and countenances that his object was defeated. But, deeply impressed with the opinion entertained by most English people of his class, that, in France, gold is a *passe-partoût*, no sooner had Questier turned his back on the *Infirmier*, and taken a step or two towards the door, than the conscientious guardian of the sick found a heavy handful of coin slipped into his palm. Not a word was exchanged; but the money spoke as eloquently to the official as the printed papers had done to poor old Matthew.

"Stay a bit, Sir, you are too hasty," cried the *Infirmier*, addressing Questier, who instantly retraced his steps. "We want no English Consul here. If you and this old

gentleman undertake to be quiet and amenable, I will see what can be done with the *Sœur Infirmière.*"

Beckoning them to follow, he unlocked a door leading up a stone staircase lighted at every landing by a hazy lantern, to an iron door ; over which stood a figure of the Virgin with a lamp burning before it. Having touched a bell-pull, the door unclosed; but a dingy serge curtain still impeded their view. No sooner was it withdrawn, than the heavy, stifling vapours within, in contrast with the bitter winter atmosphere they had been confronting, almost overpowered them.

A long narrow ward or dormitory, floored with brick, having a score or so of curtainless iron beds on either side, and a stove in the centre, was before them ; — noisome, with lamp smoke, and disturbed by moans and imprecations. Involuntarily, poor Lambert clung to the arm of his companion, who

was unable to repress an exclamation of disgust.

"Number 34 is nearly at the end of the ward, gentlemen," said the *Infirmier*, who had now assumed a far more civil tone and demeanour; — "the bed near which Sœur Angèlique is seated. With your leave I will conduct you to her, and explain your wishes."

At sight of the solemn figure of the Sister of Charity, enrobed in black, motionless and watchful, with her meagre hands folded in prayer, Questier felt instantly reassured; for he knew, as who in France does not, the vigilance and tenderness of such a nurse. But it was otherwise with Matthew Lambert. *His* narrow experience regarded her only as a Nun. He was perhaps about to find in the son of his hopes, the son of his heart, the son, alas! of his humiliation,—not alone a dying felon, an assassin, a jail-bird,—but, what was almost as abhorrent to him,—a Papist!—

No bitterness, however, was in his soul,

when, on beholding the haggard, unshorn face and colourless hands, which none but a parent's eye could have recognized as those of his handsome son, Matthew Lambert sank down on his knees beside the bed, and stifled in the coverlet his bursting emotion.

To the *Sœur* who had arisen from her seat to greet the untimely visitors, Monsieur Questier expressed, in a compassionate whisper, his fears that this trying interview might be injurious to her patient. But in reply, she gently shook her head.

"Pray for his *soul!*"—said she. "His hours are numbered.—He has already entered into his agony.—He has been insensible since noon. The Sieur Raymond, our house surgeon, informed me it was next to impossible he should be still alive at the evening visit."

"And at what time, *ma bonne Sœur*, will he be here?"

"Not these two hours."

"In that case, I must leave this poor old

English gentleman with you, till my return to meet him," said Questier, looking at his watch. And he spoke with so much self-possession, and had so completely the air of a wealthy *bourgeois*, that though both the visit and its extension were contrary to prison rule, Sœur Angélique argued from his being there at an hour so unusual, that he and his companion were privileged persons.

She allowed him, therefore, to depart unquestioned; and resumed her post of observation within view of the bed labelled No. 34, without intruding on the grief of the kneeling man. That he *did* kneel,—that heretic though he might be, he was evidently commending the dying delinquent to the mercy of God,—was a sufficient passport to her good opinion.

Summoned away, shortly afterwards, by her colleague, Sœur Claire, to assist in turning in his bed a paralytic patient at the further extremity of the ward, she found, on returning

to her seat, the old stranger still on his knees, with his face hidden on the nerveless hands of her patient. But it struck her experienced ear, that something more than the moan of pain to which it was accustomed, escaped the scarcely moving lips of the dying man. The words, if words they were, belonged to a strange tongue,—a tongue which she could not interpret. But they bespoke consciousness, or partial consciousness. That inner life, which the probe of the surgeons and restoratives of the *infirmier* had failed to stimulate, had responded to the voice of nature. With his eyes still closed, as in death, young Lambert recognised his father's presence. The old man's touch,—the old man's prayer,—the old man's sob of anguish,—had recalled his parting soul !—

Stealing gently to the bedside, Sœur Angélique would fain have smoothed the pillow of her patient, and endeavoured to improve his position. But the father motioned her

back. Henceforward, his own care would suffice. A kiss of reconciliation, imprinted by his grieving lips on the damp brow of the sufferer, would do more for the solace of poor Zack, than the ministry of the most skilful of nurses, or a bed of down.

CHAPTER VIII.

At a later hour, when Monsieur Raymond and his assistant went their rounds previous to the closing of the infirmary for the night, great was their amazement at finding Number 34, not only alive, and sensible, but resting his forlorn head on the shoulder of a grave elderly man; whose care for him, and tones in addressing him, were tender as those of a woman.

They might, perhaps, have expressed some displeasure at the infringement of their orders

and so great a breach of prison-discipline, but that, at the moment, Questier and the *Infirmier* made their appearance; having procured in the interim an *entrée de faveur* from the *Commandant*, to enable Matthew Lambert to pass the night beside the dying criminal. The plea preferred by Questier, that parental influence might possibly obtain from him the confession so desirable for the ends of justice, had overcome the opposition of the authorities.

While the wounds of the patient were examined and dressed, his father was forced to cede his place to the *Infirmier*. Happily; for exhausted by fatigue and abstinence, his strength would scarcely have sufficed him to witness the tortures of poor Zack. Questier had thoughtfully brought with him a supply of bread and wine, the only articles of food admitted into the Infirmary. But Matthew could as easily have wrenched the iron door from its staples, as swallowed either. His heart

fluttered within him; his knees bent under him. But, alas! for weakness, or wants like his, there is no restorative save the strength that is from above.

Few as were the words exchanged between him and his unfortunate son, they had sufficed to prove that the consciousness of the patient was only partially restored. Young Lambert knew neither where he was, nor why. His father's presence seemed to comfort, without surprising him. He felt that he was dying; but the fatal quarrel and its results, were obliterated from his disordered brain. That his untimely death was in some way or other the result of vice and folly, was, however, his vague conclusion.

"I knew it would end so," he faltered, in broken accents, which none but a parent's ear could have interpreted. "I knew it—I knew it.—Mark Barneson warned me how it would end.—But no matter.—My poor father forgives me.—I felt his tears just now dropping

on my hand,—the first I ever knew him shed, dear, good old man!—And so, I shall die happy,—happier than I deserve."

It was just after these words, feebly uttered and at long intervals, had cut to the very soul of Matthew Lambert, that he was forced to surrender his place beside his son's pillow, for a time, to the surgeons and Sœur Angélique. But, though excluded from a view of their operations, the faint cries that burst from the lips of his son, were almost as hard to bear as would have been the sight of his anguish. When, at the conclusion of their task, Monsieur Raymond advanced towards Questier, with whom he was slightly acquainted, to offer him a brief explanation of the condition of the prisoner, though not a syllable he uttered was intelligible to Lambert, the contracted anxious brow of the surgeon fully explained his evil auguries.

His opinion of the case was, in fact, little changed since morning. One of nature's

miracles had partially restored the faculties of Number 34. But his danger was still imminent. An inward formation, attributable to the point of the knife with which he had been stabbed having broken in the wound, and remaining in the lungs, threatened sudden suffocation. "He must remain perfectly unmolested, but carefully watched. On any change of countenance, his shoulders must be raised. His parched lips might be occasionally moistened, but not even liquid food administered."

Sœur Angélique listened and promised. Matthew Lambert listened and despaired. It mattered not that the decree of the physician was uttered in a strange tongue. An instinct surer than the teaching of science, assured him that the morrow's sun would dawn in vain for poor Zack!

Among strangers,—among Papists!—In the infirmary of a gaol, and with bloodguiltiness on his young soul!—That boy, over whose

cradle his hopes had been so fond,—his prayers so fervent.—

As much as could be told him was explained. To Sœur Angélique was entrusted the care of the prisoner; to the old man, who by the mercy of the *Commandant* was permitted to assist her, his consolation. On quitting the bedside, Questier wrung his hand with earnest pity. But Matthew felt it not; Matthew heard and saw nothing that was passing around him. The questions abruptly addressed to other "numbers" by Monsieur Raymond, as he proceeded leisurely up the *salle*, and felt a pulse or two, or held a light to the face of more than one unquiet sleeper, did not molest Matthew. He kept murmuring inquiries into the ear of Zack, whether his pain had abated — whether he thought he could rest?—

"For ever and ever, father!" was the slowly murmured response. "Pray to God for me, that my end may be peaceful.—Pray,

father!—I dare not—I seem to have forgotten the words."

Thus adjured, the old man, in faint but unfaltering accents, recited what might have been the outpouring of a contrite heart, on the approach of death; humble, yet reliant.

But his whispers, low as they were, disturbed the vigils of Sœur Angélique, who, with her clasped hands concealed under her folded cuffs, was herself engaged in those silent orisons which fill up the interstices of the busy life of a Sister of Charity. With hushing words and an interdictory gesture, she approached the refractory foreigner.

But at such a moment, the interdiction of Pope or Patriarch would not have availed. Her foreign figure and dialect, however, appeared to startle the bewildered prisoner.

"Where are we, father?" said he. "I thought we were at home—I hoped we were at home.—Where are we?"—

The poor old man hesitated to answer,

"France" or "Hâvre." He was afraid of arousing to too keen a sense of his degradation, the unfortunate being in whose frame the pulse of life was fluttering.

"Yes, I remember now!" resumed Zack, after a painful pause. "Home and mother and sisters, I shall never see again. Poor mother, poor sisters!—Don't tell them how I died, father.—Let it all be forgotten. No one need ever name my name again."

His father endeavoured to silence him; to lead his thoughts from present pain and present humiliation, to future responsibility. He wanted to say "Believe and be saved!"—He wanted to convince the sinner's wavering mind that, at the eleventh hour, repentance stands in lieu of righteousness.

But his lips were sealed. Either his own convictions were infirm, or he lacked the habit of preaching, to the guilty, the doctrine so easily unfolded to the innocent. More likely still, the impeded respiration and beat-

ing pulses of parental anguish—how different from the salaried self-possession of the chaplain or ordinary,—suspended his utterance; for nothing was audible of his exhortation, but—"My son, my son!"—

"You will go back alone to our poor old country," murmured Zack, in return, fondly inclining his cheek towards the venerable head that lay sobbing on his pillow; "and you must tell Mark Barneson, father, how sadly his warning came to pass. My old chum, Mark!—What a friend he always was to me! How well he wished us all!—Mark must fill my place, father. Let him be a son to you; and let poor Chrissy be to you as a daughter. —Let their home be always at Bracknell. Promise me—promise me!"

At such a moment, what would not Matthew Lambert have promised!—

"Thank you, good, kind old father!" said the dying man, his voice growing fainter and fainter. "I feel as if, while the Barnesons

remain part of the family, I should be still, still among you.—Oh! father, give, give me your hand!"—

The old man started up.—The change of countenance foretold by the surgeon, was taking place. First, a suffocating gasp,—then a fearful hæmorrhage burst from the convulsed lips of his son.

Help was speedily afforded, but help was vain. The *infirmier*, summoned by Sœur Angélique, applied with ready skill the remedies suggested by Monsieur Raymond. But the surgeon's gloomy prognostics were speedily fulfilled. That turbulent spirit was at rest.

It was to the agonised old father, rather than to the released prisoner, that their care was now directed. Number 34 was a blank; a thing that had been,—a thing to be removed as soon as possible.—But to the *infirmier*, who had tasted of his liberality, Matthew Lambert was still an object of interest.

"It seems cruel, poor old gentleman! to

try to bring him to himself," said he, addressing Sœur Angélique, who had loosened the old man's cravat, and was bathing his temples with vinegar as he lay in a death-like swoon. "Let us trust to nature, *ma chère Sœur*. Let us leave him to come round."

But Sœur Angélique, fearing that her own rest, or, as *she* stated the case, fearing that the other "beds" in the *Salle* might be disturbed by the outcry of grief likely to follow returning consciousness, suggested that the bereaved father could not be too speedily removed.

But where, and how?—

"It wants five hours to morning," remonstrated the *infirmier*. "Till then, the wicket cannot be opened, except by order of the *Commandant*."

The good sister, however, persisted that, between them, the insensible old stranger might be conveyed into a miserable bed-room adjoining the ward, appropriated to the use of

the *infirmiers*. And thither he was accordingly transported.

Upon the pallet on which they laid him, the gradations from faintness to stupor, and finally to the heavy sleep of utter exhaustion, were noted only by the eye which watcheth over all. Sœur Angélique and the *infirmier*, accustomed to deal with all mental disturbance as a physical ailment, had administered a powerful opiate in the draught of water he asked for; and the poor old man slept and slept, till many hours after sunrise.

When at length roused to consciousness, the humane Questier was seated wistfully by his bedside, and Louis in attendance.

"You are to return no more, sir, to the hotel," said the latter, soothingly. "Monsieur Questier here begs me to tell you that your effects have been removed to his house. There, you can remain in quiet, till your return to England."

For some minutes, Matthew Lambert re-

mained gazing on them in silence, as if all were a dream. Happy for him could the illusion have been prolonged! But, by degrees, came the grievous consciousness of past events;—the horrors of the preceding night,—the sorrows of the preceding day.

"No, no,—I cannot quit my poor son," muttered he, with quivering lips. "I must remain till the last with my poor, poor Zack."

"We have already received notice from the authorities, my dear sir, to quit the prison," was Questier's reply. "We have no further business here. Our presence was sanctioned only by private favour."

"But they will not surely drive me away from the body of my unfortunate boy? Who but his father is to superintend his burial?—I want to take him with me to England.—I want him to rest among his own people!"—

An interchange of compassionate glances between Questier and his interpreter implied that a full explanation was inevitable. But how

was this sorrowing father to be told that the body of his son was forfeited to the law; that, for the advantage of what are termed "the interests of science," it had already been removed to the *Théatre d'Anatomie;* and that after being dealt with by the surgeons, the mutilated remains must be interred within the precincts of the prison?—No officiating priest —no consecrated ground, for the spiller of blood!—

But, to their surprise, Lambert listened submissively to all these details. The hand of God had humbled him to the dust. The law of the land was not to be resisted. Without a word of remonstrance, he rose and followed them. Installed under Questier's roof, he suffered himself to be conducted to the tranquil room assigned him. He asked only to be alone. He wanted to reflect—he wanted to pray—he wanted to weep!

Poor miserable, helpless, heart-broken man! But for those prayers—those tears—how ut-

terly forlorn !—That he was sustained by them, even to consolation, was evident when, in the dusk of the evening, he announced to his kind host his intention of sailing for England in the packet of the following day.

"It was necessary," he said, "that he should be at home again; necessary that he should be the first to communicate to his family the calamity which had befallen them."

For a time, the worthy man who had played towards him in all pity and sincerity the part of the good Samaritan, would fain have dissuaded him. But he was forced to give way. The mourner listened with wonder to the assertion that rest and quiet would restore him; —*him*, who would fain have wandered on and on, to the ends of the earth !—

He consented only that the attentive *commissionnaire* should place him and his effects on board the packet; and Monsieur Questier undertake the arrangement of his pecuniary affairs. At some future time, he would ac-

knowledge and repay his many obligations.—All he desired was to be gone.

Scarcely two days had elapsed since poor Lambert quitted the deck of the Curlew, in which he now re-embarked; and the events of those terrible eight and forty hours had effaced from his mind all trace of his preceding life. So absorbed was he in his griefs, that he did not perceive what an intense object of interest he had become to all on board; or how completely versed were the English gossips in the sad details of his story. He felt no fatigue—he shrank from no observation. His mind's eye was intent upon a narrow bed with a miserable prison-rug enwrapping a dead body; and the sad fireside where it became his duty to break to the tenderest of mothers the loss of her favourite child.

This last misery, however, was spared him. Some portion of the fatal truth had been already communicated by Drever; and when at length the bereaved father arrived at Birming-

ham, so gloomy was his demeanour, and so shaken his frame, that no one dared to utter a word of interrogation.

Mrs. Lambert, indeed, ventured to ask a single question in elucidation of the hints let fall by Drever. But even her faltering voice and blanched face obtained only a curt and forbidding answer.

"It was the last wish of our poor lost boy," he replied, assuming a firmness belied by his quivering features, "that his faults and frailties should pass from among us, even as *he* has passed. Let his name, wife, be forgotten, except in our prayers to God. If by the mercy of the Almighty we should meet him again, it will be where sins are forgiven, and tears wiped from all faces.—Henceforward, let us speak of him no more."

CHAPTER IX.

Such were the mournful antecedents which originated the adoption of Mark Barneson into the great house of Lambert and Co.

Not that, at the period in question, they had accomplished a fifth part of the almost national importance to which five-and-thirty years of scarcely interrupted Peace, and the adaptation of Steam-power to so many branches of commercial enterprise, have since elevated the firm. But they were even then

rising into eminence; and when the long sickness of old Lambert threw the direction of his business completely into the hands of the junior partner, every day tended to extend their reputation and increase their traffic. Even the envious and hard-headed foreman, Alick Ferrier, was forced to admit that the zeal and abilities of Barneson had done wonders for the advancement of the Bracknell Works.

Matthew Lambert had, consequently, some pretext for altogether withdrawing his heed from the things of this world. Though he chose to attribute to a heavy cold caught on his inclement passage home from France, the sudden break-up of his constitution, his decline was readily attributed by the very small circle that interested itself in his comings and goings, to the untimely end of his unfortunate son. He never mentioned his name. The worst was never known in Birmingham. Zack Lambert was understood to have lost his life in a drunken fray with some French pro-

fligates; a sufficient explanation of the profound and lasting affliction of one so pious as Matthew Lambert the Elder. From the first, his kinsfolk and acquaintance predicted that he would never recover the blow.

Mr. Brathwaite, the eminent local surgeon by whom he was attended, had warned him to put his house in order.

Still, when at length his death-bell tolled, it came as a surprise. Everything since the dreadful event had been so progressive in the secluded household of the Lamberts, that no one was prepared for the one great change. Even those who witnessed the slow uncomplaining decline of the poor old man were startled.

Matthew Lambert alone was prepared. When he brought back his broken heart and broken health into the bosom of his family; he had intended to enter into full explanation with him whom poor Zack designated in his last moments as his "dear old chum;" and express

both to Mark and Christina, his son's and his own desire, that they should become as children of his own. But the day never dawned that was to afford strength and courage for such trying words. Once or twice, on Sabbath evenings, when the family circle was collected, he made up his mind to speak. But to such a proposition as he had to make, more, much more must be added. They, or his poor wife, might question him in return. The whole dreadful truth might be wrung out of him. And at the bare thought of such a recapitulation, cold dews burst from his brow, and his breath seemed choking in his throat. Lest his old age should shame itself by the weakness of tears, in presence of the wife and daughters before whom he had ever maintained so much dignity of manly self-possession, the gray-headed man would arise and repair to his own chamber; in order that, unwatched, he might lift up his voice and weep. He bore his affliction with the same proud

reserve which has actuated prelates and abdicated sovereigns in wearing their hair shirts, or acupointed cinctures.

But his feebleness soon increased so rapidly that he no longer relied upon himself. All he would fain have said, therefore, he committed to paper. His last will, formally drawn up by a lawyer, bequeathed in three equal parts to Mark Barneson and his daughters, his whole property in the Bracknell Works a life annuity of one thousand per annum being first paid to his widow. Legacies of some amount were bequeathed to Christina and Alick Ferrier, and even to Drever and his wife. But no other portion of capital was to be abstracted from the business, during the life-time of either of the girls.

Mrs. Lambert and Mark were appointed co-executors of the will; and to the marriage of Rhoda or Lettice, the consent of both was to be indispensable. The bequest made to them, was otherwise to be null and void.

"I do not wish my girls to match above their own station in life," ran the tenour of the will. "An honest man will make the best husband. Above all, should it meet the future inclinations of my much-esteemed young friend, Mark Barneson, to make either of them his wife, my utmost desires would be accomplished. There was a time when I regarded the difference of religious opinions between us, as an obstacle. But for this bigoted prejudice, I have heavily atoned; and should my daughters, on attaining maturity, incline to the Church of England, so be it,—provided that to the creed of their free choice they piously adhere.

"Till Christina Barneson shall acquire a home of her own, let her remain a daughter to my wife, a sister to my girls. Under her guidance they will grow up good and prudent women; and God's blessing be upon them all."

To the testamentary dispositions of the old

ironmaster, there was no one to demur. A few relatives disappointed of legacies, complained that he had given an undue preference to strangers. But even these were forced to admit that he could not have committed the charge of his family, or of the Bracknell Works, to abler or more equitable hands than those of his "much-esteemed young friend, Mark Barneson." Even the bequest to his foreman was pardoned by those who knew how to appreciate the services of Alick Ferrier to the firm.

But almost before the Foundry-gate closed upon the funeral train of Matthew Lambert, they ceased to interest themselves in the question. A manufacturing town is too busy and too practical, for gossip or conjecture. A failure to-day—a new speculation to-morrow, —sweep away those deleterious cobwebs, which in less active communities, are apt to over-run both fact and argument.

In the little world contained within the

Works, the change in their administration excited small notice. For a year past, the ascendancy of Barneson had been tacitly recognised; and whether he worked to advance the interests of his infirm senior partner, or of his youthful wards, signified little to the Hands, provided their weekly wages were duly forthcoming. They saw that the firm prospered,—that the foreman was active and vigilant. What passed in the gloomy parlour whose blinds were always closed, or how fared the bereaved family, whose mourning garments were seldom espied, unless on their way to chapel, was no affair of theirs.

Even with the man thus singularly advanced from indigence to wealth, use soon became second nature. Routine gradually accomplished its work. The new partner in the firm of Lambert and Co, filled little more space in the world, or in his own conceit, than Barneson the clerk. His time was even

less his own, because his duties were more imperative.

That noble sonnet of Wordsworth, (which most women know by heart, and men would do well to study,)

> The world is too much with us. Early and late,
> Getting or spending, we lay waste our powers,

was never more fully exemplified than in the case of him, who, seven years before, had wept at quitting the hawthorn-hedges and glassy pools of Ryecroft Farm; and was now content with the stamping of levers and whirring of wheels; and discovered poetry in the roar of the furnace, and the black eddies of its smoke.

Rhoda and Lettice were too young for companionship,—their mother was too cold and self-contained,—and with his sister, he seldom held converse apart. Since the untimely end of young Lambert, Christina had become reserved towards him. She secretly accused him of want of sensibility. She made no

allowance for the influence of his early estrangement from family affections, or the peremptory nature of his duties.

Mark was in the habit of snatching up his hat for a hasty exit after meal-times; already feeling in his pocket for letters to be attended to. As with other men of business, the ties of domestic life were beginning to be subsidiary to the magic symbols L. S. D. If, in his clerkhood, unmitigated industry was the portion of one who had a needy family to provide for, how much more on the part of one trusted and endowed as he had been by the munificence of his late master?—For the future prosperity of the firm of Lambert and Co., he felt answerable to the dead;—to the old man who had provided for him as for a son,—to poor Zack, who had loved him as a brother.

One pleasant Sabbath afternoon in May, some eight months after his accession of authority, Mark Barneson was about to retire, as

usual, to his own room,—(no longer, however, the desolate attic)—after escorting home the family from chapel; when his sister, still wearing her bonnet and shawl, stood betwixt him and the door. They were alone; for Mrs. Lambert kept up the pious custom of her late husband, of bestowing Sunday instructions on her daughters.

"Are we never again to enjoy a walk together?" inquired Christina. "Have you become too grand, Mark, for an occasional holiday?"

Her brother smiled. "I hope not. But just now, dear Chrissy, I am terribly busy. I have three letters to answer by to-night's post."

"And the bag does not close till eight! Can't you afford me half-an-hour in the interim?"

"Half-an-hour will scarcely take us within sight of the daisies; and the streets are too crowded for a pleasant walk."

"Then let us have our talk out here," said

his sister, seating herself so resolutely that he was forced to follow her example.

"I did not know, my dear girl, you wanted to speak to me," he kindly observed. "Had you said so at first, Chrissy, *my* business should have given place to yours."

"Business, I have none—at least none that you would call so. I wish only to inquire whether we are to spend the summer in Birmingham?"

"But the summer is not yet here."

Christina replied, by pointing to the strip of dim blue sky, scantily visible between the dark moreen curtains of that dreary parlour.

"It is at hand.—Last year we were kept prisoners here by the long illness of poor Mr. Lambert.—There is nothing to detain us now."

"Has Mrs. Lambert expressed any inclination to remove to the country?"

"When does she express an inclination of

any kind?—I sometimes doubt whether she ever feels one."

"It would be a sad effort to her to quit the house where she closed her husband's eyes, and saw the last of poor Zack!" observed Mark.

"The more reason that we should prompt her to make it. Mrs. Lambert seldom thinks for herself; and situated as we are towards her, we should think for her. She requires country air; and so do Rhoda and Lettice."

"Two healthier girls, I never saw!"

"But does it never occur to you that their spirits may be clouded, and their minds straitened, by the dull indoor life they are leading?"

"In the country, they would lose the advantage of masters, Chrissy; and you admit that you are not equal to their sole tuition."

"Far from it. But what are mere superficial accomplishments, acquired in a sunless,

smoky, schoolroom, compared with all that is to be learned in the free range of a country life; the joyousness, the unconstraint, and all the sympathies and aspects of rural nature."

An involuntary smile played on the countenance of Mark.

It was the first time he had ever noticed in his sister a particle of enthusiasm.

"As a practical man, Mark, you naturally despise my theories," she rejoined, calmly and unabashed. "But remember that the nature of these dear pupils of mine, regards *your* happiness even more than my own. One or other of them is to be your wife."

"At some distant period, perhaps. But why talk of it now?—They are still so young."

"Rhoda is nearly sixteen."

"Sixteen, in years.—In intellect, a mere child."

"And how is she ever to be otherwise, if debarred from all social intercourse, all opportunity of observation, all wholesome pursuits

and recreations?—Believe me it is a duty you owe your wards, destined as they are to opulence, to brighten the gloom of their lives, and prepare them for becoming intelligent companions and happy wives and mothers."

For a moment, Mark Barneson, still intent upon the business-letters from which his sister's lecture was detaining him, felt that she was exercising somewhat extensively her privilege of governesship. But the energy of her assertions startled him. His eye, usually unobservant in such matters, was struck by the change which the last two years had effected in her own countenance. The bloom and elasticity of youth were gone. Her face looked careworn, almost haggard.—How was this?—She who had endured with so much fortitude the misfortunes of her family and her own indigence, had the troubles of comparative strangers weighed so heavily on her mind as to imprint wrinkles on her brow, and sour her very nature?—

He had taken too little interest of late in poor Christina's health and happiness. Perhaps it was her own cause she was pleading, in these aspirations after country air.

"Nothing would be easier," said he, carefully avoiding any avowal of his conjectures, "than to hire some summer residence within reach of Birmingham, where I might often be with you. But will Mrs. Lambert agree to this?—A creature of habit, she will not be happy in a strange place."

"She will be *happy* nowhere. But if we satisfy her that the change is good and expedient for her daughters, she will not oppose it."

Mark Barneson had no other plea to urge. A peevish complaint escaped his lips, however, at his utter want of leisure to seek a fitting abode for his wards; and the task was consequently undertaken by his sister. Anything to escape from a spot so replete with painful reminiscences as Bracknell Foundry. There,

the dead still sat beside her at the board,—still watched her from the hearth-side. Though the promptings of a pure mind had caused her to shrink from becoming the wife of a libertine, the death of poor Zack and the deep affliction of his parents, had suggested many a self-reproach. She knew that she might have saved him. She felt that she might have reformed him. His fervent, disinterested attachment ought to have bespoken her gratitude. All that was good in him she now remembered: all that was repellent, she had forgotten. It was because of her strong resemblance to her late brother that, of the two girls, Rhoda was her favourite.

So earnest, in fact, was her desire to break through a thousand associations connecting his memory with the old homestead at Bracknell Works, that, within a few weeks of Christina's first suggestion to her brother, the family was settled in a cheerful abode, called Arden Manor,—where they were roused from their

morning sleep by the pure light of day, and the whistling of the blackbirds, instead of the vulgar-clamour of a manufacturing town.

CHAPTER X.

But that the influence of Christina Barneson was paramount with Mrs. Lambert, she might perhaps have rebelled against the selection of a residence situated at more than twenty miles' distance from the tall chimneys of what she still called her home. But Miss Barneson had been careful to supply an obstacle to over-frequent visits, irksome to her brother and disadvantageous to his wards; as well as to render impossible those of Fer-

rier; against whom, though his intimacy with Mark was daily increasing, she cherished all her former repugnance.

Once established at Arden, however, the meek-spirited old lady readily took root. Her new abode was a commodious old grange, on the outskirts of a populous village; but divided from it by extensive gardens, laid out in old-fashioned labyrinths, interspersed with fish-ponds shaded by crooked-legged quince-trees, and fed by a brawling stream which produced the finest cray-fish in the country.

Under coops of wirework on the lawn, a few gold and silver pheasants pecked and pined away their days; while in the orchard hobbled a lame raven, said to be nearly as old as the Manor-house—certainly older than the gray-headed gardener, no longer capable of harder work than the leisurely interpretation of the Latin inscription on the weather-worn sun-dial.

But what a new and pleasant world to

Rhoda and Lettice! How early they rose, to wander through those labyrinths of phyllirea and alaternus; and how late they lingered in the dusk, watching the swallows as they lightly skimmed the fishponds, or the ephemera hovering among the reeds. Their spirits, long depressed by the stillness of a sorrow-stricken home, revived in the sunshine; and the hues of health gradually appeared on their cheeks.

Though but a year's difference of age existed between the sisters, there was a world-wide disparity in disposition. Reckless, and passionate, Rhoda Lambert, both in features and temper resembled her unfortunate brother; while Lettice was docile as a lamb, and fair as an angel.

But her face as seen once, was seen for ever; —unvarying, unimpressive, and devoid of intellectual distinction.

For some time after undertaking the tuition of the sisters, Christina had persuaded herself

that the dulness of the younger arose from neglect, and endeavoured to raise her to a higher level. But her efforts tended only to perplex and harass the gentle girl; who could scarcely be made to understand that two and two made four, or that Paris was not the capital of Germany. By degrees, Lettice was left to her needle-work beside the infirm mother on whom she waited with watchful and untiring devotion; while her better endowed sister plunged fearlessly into the mysteries of algebra, or played at cat's-cradle with the problems of Euclid.

"Luckily, her deficiencies will pass unnoticed," mused Christina, when endeavouring to reconcile herself to her failure. "With beauty and fortune such as hers, Lettice will make her way in the world. But how fortunate for Mark that he has an alternative!—Had she been an only child, what a wife for an active-minded man!—Whereas Rhoda possesses not only first rate abilities, but is full of energy and ambition."

At present, however, the qualifications of either sister appeared to make little impression on their guardian. His rare visits to the Manor House were devoted to the discussion of business with his co-executrix; and he noticed the girls almost as unconcernedly as the tame pheasants in their aviary, or the lame raven in the orchard.

Their increasing stature or amended bearing rarely elicited a remark. The announcement of a new patent, or recent bankruptcy, were facts far more interesting: and his deferential reference to the opinions of Ferrier on all possible subjects, exhausted the patience of his sister. She felt that Mark was degenerating; that he was becoming a mere tradesman; and half repented that, by consulting his own inclination and the interests of the girls, she had abandoned him to the society and influence of a man susceptible only of mercenary views.

"I do believe," she exclaimed one day in

a fit of indignation, when he refused to dine and sleep at Arden, on the plea of a business-appointment with Ferrier, at the new gas-works; "I *do* believe, Mark, that the greatest enjoyment of your life is to sit side by side with that Ready Reckoner, casting up accounts together and telling over piles of gold, like the two Misers of Quintin Matsys!"

But though this accusation, and remarks still bitterer and more cross-grained, escaped the lips of Miss Barneson, she did not relax in her endeavours to perfect in Rhoda Lambert all that could enhance her value as a wife to her thrifty brother. She endeavoured to repress her petulant temper, and render her active, prudent, hardy, healthful; and though almost alarmed, at times, by the wilfulness and obduracy of her pupil, looked forward to see her soften under the influence of the domestic affections, into a holy matron, — guardian angel of the house of Lambert and Co.

It was rather to gratify his sister, however, than from any personal interest in her progress, that Mark, in his occasional visits, half-interrogated, half-rallied his elder ward concerning those wondrous mathematical triumphs which, according to Chrissy, were to throw Sir Isaac Newton into the shade.

"If," thought Mark, as he journeyed back to Birmingham, surprised to find her proficiencies far greater than he had prepared himself to expect, "Ferrier should, as he probably will, propose to make Rhoda his wife, this peculiar turn of her mind may prove highly advantageous to us all."

The clause of preference accorded to himself by the will of his late patron, appeared to have escaped his memory.

CHAPTER XI.

New settlers in an English country village, are apt to be assailed either by a gust of favour, or a current of idle scandal. The wind of public opinion, whether from the bleak East or emollient West, bloweth where it listeth. When there is nothing evil to be asserted concerning the strangers, a spiteful or supercilious tone is sometimes assumed, in which their very merits may be so discussed as to tend to their disparagement.

Arden, like other places, had its ædiles! There was a Sir Arscott Littlecote at Arden Hall, and an Archdeacon Bilston at the Rectory, whose families had never chosen to visit the sickly old spinster to whom the Manor House belonged, because her mother had been a *divorcée*, and she was reputed illegitimate; and after a struggle of nearly twenty years with their stiffneckedness, Miss Maudsley had been hunted away to Bath, in quest of social intercourse. The prospect of solitary old maidenhood had banished her from the pencilled pheasants and halting raven.

Against the Widow Lambert, her handsome girls, and grave-looking governess, they had at first nothing to insinuate. The house agent could certify only their opulence. But when it appeared that Mrs. Lambert had brought no introduction to the neighbourhood, and made no attempt to repair the deficiency, the Hall and Rectory interchanged notes of interrogation and a contemptuous whisper of "*nou-*

veaux riches." In obscure people, wealth is an impertinence. The Hall buttoned up its mouth as if afraid to pronounce the word "Brummagem;" the Rectory shrugged its shoulders while uttering the terrible anathema "dissenters!"—The fiat went forth.—The Lamberts were not to be visited.—In their case, the gust blew East by East, with twelve degrees of frost.

Had either Hall or Rectory been aware that the personalty of the late Matthew Lambert,—neither esquire, nor even gentleman,—but simply Matthew Lambert,—was sworn to for probate duty as under £130,000, which, in the language of Doctor's Commons, implies £150,000—they would probably have conceded a point or two in favour of his heiresses; for both Hall and Rectory had prodigal sons and indigent nephews to provide for. But they knew as little of the estate of the rich iron-founder, as of his testamentary letter and its bequests; and as there was nothing in the

bombazine dresses of the two girls,—the one so pretty, the other so handsome,—to announce their golden prospects, the new people were set down as "unconsidered trifles."

> The phrase I quote, is
> As much as saying "they're beneath your notice."

When it was perceived in Arden that the only visitors to the Manor House were an ill-dressed young man, in deep mourning of clerkly cut, evidently a relation of the family, and an over-dressed one, somewhat older, who probably purposed to become so, but who made his appearance at rare intervals and was not always admitted, it was decided that the Hall and Rectory had gained nothing by its transfer from Miss Maudsley to the Lamberts.

In almost all counties whose blue skies are blurred by the chimneys of factories and forges, and whose mother-earth is corrupted by the scoriæ of furnaces, there exists a permanent feud between the landed gentry and the huge monster called Trade, which heaves,

bellows, and vomits fire in the midst of them, as, of old, the Dragon of Wantley: not deigning to remember that whereas the Dragon, exterminated by More of More Hall, devoured houses and steeples, the modern monster creates them, swallowing only the produce of their dirty acres,—accepting their lean kine as beef, and their rancid sheep as Southdowns. —And though the consumption of a manufacturing town doubles the value of his estate, the accent of a Warwickshire squire in enunciating the name of Birmingham, (*he* does not call it Brummagem, lest the familiar word should be interpreted into acquaintanceship!) or a lord of Lancashire the words Manchester or Liverpool, conveys a lesson to linguists.

"I have a place near Manchester. *Of course* I never reside there;—that would be impossible. But luckily, it is easy to let," —was a common form of parlance in the days we have been describing. The Progress movement had not yet commenced

which is gradually converting our industrial northern cities into minor capitals. Movement of any kind was, in fact, considered in those times, all but revolutionary. The business of Birmingham was to make nails, teaboards, and door-handles, — arms, when war was brisk,—steam-engines, when it could find a purchaser:—but to hold its tongue.—Manchester was bound to supply us with servants' sheeting and fast-coloured calicoes. Liverpool was our Cheap John, or general merchant, exporting our damaged goods, and supplying us in return with raw material.—But "Ne sutor ultra crepidam." Out of business hours, we were not on bowing terms with those Great Unwashed. Once a year, the political lion of the day went down and roared them a speech; not, however, addressed to *their* ears, but calculated to be transmitted, through the press, to the uttermost ends of the earth as a party manifesto, which would cause the whole official atmosphere to vibrate. But for the ensuing

eleven months and twenty-nine days, the manufacturing or commercial city became only a word on a map; a name in the Gazetteer, or the city article. Its millions might find their way into the public coffers: its hundreds of thousands of living souls were, like Viola's history—"a blank, my lord!"

The byeword "Brummagem" was reserved to typify to ears polite everything that was vulgar or counterfeit; while that of "flue," conveyed, in Derbyshire or Lancashire, all the scorn included in the stigma of "clod," as applied by the exclusives of club windows in St. James's Street, to some great landowner, the parliamentary representative of a wilderness of clay—or mud.

For England was still unliberalised. It had not yet discovered that science was endowing its midland and north-western capitalists with other gifts besides spinning-jennies and power-looms; or that modern Art receives its richest guerdon from hands outstretched, on Saturday

nights, to distribute thousands of pounds among laborious hundreds of their fellow-creatures. Mechanics' Institutes, Athenæums, Reading Societies, were still in their rickety infancy. Even fantastic Fashion had yet to learn that the choicest productions of her pet upholsterers, silk-mercers, and makers-up of

Black, white, and grey, with all their trumpery,

are despatched from the aulic metropolis to the leading trade-marts of the land.

Sir Arscott Littlecote had consequently some pretext for the grimace with which he eschewed all mention of the nail-making city, of whose manners and customs he knew about as much as of those of Pekin. Whenever his Birmingham man-of-business put in an occasional appearance at the Hall, for the signature of leases or mortgage of land, Sir Arscott was sure to order the library windows set open after his departure, for the purpose of extra ventilation; and when this same Mr. Girdlestone (for Girdlestone, Wrench, and Co.) hesi-

tatingly suggested to his fastidious employer that the new tenant of the Manor House was widow of Matthew Lambert, the patentee of the draining engine by which his waste lands at Arden Moss had been converted into the finest pastures on his estate, Sir Arscott, a little astonished at his attorney's unwonted presumption, silenced him at once by observing that he knew and wished to know nothing concerning the Birmingham tradespeople ; that to live within five-and-twenty miles of their smoke and vulgarity, was enough !

It was some compensation, though Sir Arscott was blind to the fact, that he was born at a period when a baronet of 1611, with an estate of ten thousand a year, more especially if a county member and tolerably reputable in private life, was privileged to talk as much nonsense as he pleased in his own dining-room, and speak as much in the House of Commons, without risk of being coughed down. Just as, in our days, Baronets

and Police Magistrates are, by prescriptive right and the diction of the Press, qualified as "worthy," for some preceding centuries the country-baronet class of the community furnished to the country its finest specimens of Bores: dull, consequential, and ignorant. Sir Arscott might be more accurate in his distribution of the letter H than the mechanics or mechanicians of the manufacturing city he despised. But not a nailer of them all ever uttered in the course of his lifetime such "an infinite deal of nothing," as the "worthy baronet" of Arden Hall managed to whip up into plausible froth, within limit of a single day.

For five-and-twenty years after the attainment of his majority, Sir Arscott Littlecote had been a model Baronet; having married the daughter of an Earl, the lord lieutenant of his County; a young lady, homely of feature, but admirably brought up; pompous and foolish as himself, and equally devoted to the shows and seemings of life. Together, they progressed

every spring to their "family mansion" in Bruton Street, for levees, drawing-rooms, and an annual concert, where their extensive visiting list was made to pass muster arrayed in sempiternal family diamonds and the fashions of the preceding season; and together, they returned to Arden Hall, at the commencement of grouse-shooting, to parade their renovated arrogance before their country neighbours.

But alas! just as the only son which had graced their sympathetic union attained years of discretion, Lady Catherine, like the wife of Sir Balaam, "catched a cold and died." All that remained of her, to mortal ken, was an ample marble tablet surmounting the family pew; commemorating in turgid phrase her high descent and lofty virtues; and surmounted by a couple of weeping swollen-faced cherubim, designed perhaps to attest to the world, to the end of time, the influenza which had laid Lady Catherine Littlecote in the vault below.

The loss of this congenial partner gave rise

to the grand error of Sir Arscott's life. Convinced that a baronetcy becomes only half a distinction when singly represented, he chose to secure another Lady Littlecote to do the honours of the family diamonds; and under some singular aberration of intellect, selected a wife who had nothing to recommend her but youth, beauty, and gentleness; in the belief, perhaps, that a girl so amenable to the authority of her parents as to be lectured into becoming the wife of a man treble her age, and notoriously disagreeable, would be easily dragooned. And so it proved. To the new Lady Littlecote, her husband's word was law. The daughter of a Curate in the neighbourhood of Arden, she had been brought up to regard Sir Arscott as secondary in consequence only to the Sovereign of the realm; —a Solon on the Bench,—a saint in the family pew, where she was fated to be a martyr.

But though submissive as a spaniel, the bride was not quite so teachable. During

Lady Littlecote's first and only season in London, her artlessness so grievously committed Sir Arscott in the sight of his order, that he not only let on lease his mansion in Bruton Street, but resigned to his son Rupert his seat in the House of Commons. The family diamonds were consigned to the safe-keeping of the family banker; and the lovely Lady Littlecote, too rustic for the patience of the starched maiden sisters of his late wife, Lady Lucy and Lady Leonora Bellasis, to the safe-keeping of Arden Hall.

She did not repine. Other jewels were shortly afterwards vouchsafed her. Three little girls, of whom in successive years she became the mother, occupied her time and thoughts. In the intervals of nursing the rheumatic gout of Sir Arscott, she became a cheerful, active woman, the companion and playmate of her three happy children.

Such a pleasant quartette to look upon:—the young mother, almost as light of heart and

tender of nature as the crowing baby ! But alas ! a gloomy shadow was destined to overcloud the days of that soft-hearted being, and render serious that girlish brow. Just as her little girls were progressing from the nursery to the schoolroom, two of her treasures were snatched from her by malignant scarlet fever ; and she was left with only her second girl, little Helen, who thenceforward became so precious a possession, that there was almost as much pain as pleasure in the tenure. Lady Littlecote could scarcely bear to trust her out of her sight ; and the fits of rheumatic gout which chained her for four months out of every twelve to the couch of a peevish valetudinarian, became all the more tedious, that Sir Arscott, during his illnesses, condemned his little daughter to close imprisonment in the schoolroom, as he would have mittimused a vagrant to the mill.

At the best of times, poor Helen's life was that of a squirrel in a cage ; a *gilded* cage, but not the less irksome to the poor squirrel.

Her walks with her governess were limited to the park and gardens of Arden Hall. From her childhood, she had no playmates,—no companions ;—only the memory of the pretty little sisters who had vanished ; and the sad-faced mother, who could scarcely look at her without tears.—The village afforded nothing of sufficient degree for a game of romps with the young lady of the Hall.

Even her brother Rupert when, during the parliamentary recess, he occasionally visited the Hall albeit unused to the melting mood in favour of anybody whose grievances could not be expanded into a petition, or made the subject of a motion, expressed some pity for the isolation of his little sister.

" Helen is growing up singularly pretty, sir," said he to his father, perhaps to cut short a political catechism to which he was annually subjected at the close of the session ; " the image of that beautiful Lady Althea Littlecote, whose picture by Kneller hangs in the library.

But her face wants expression. It has none of the piquancy of Lady Althea,—none of the sprightliness of girlhood.—She lives too much with grown-up people."

And as Sir Arscott, though he never permitted his low-born spouse to trouble him with her opinions, was apt to entertain the suggestions of the young gentleman having genuine Littlecote blood in his veins, it might have been expected that, thus enlightened, he would become less harsh in interdicting all intercourse between his family and the new comers at the Manor.

For one day, when Miss Barneson and her pupils were profiting by a public road that intersected the Arden estate, to enjoy the beautiful park-scenery so new to Rhoda and Lettice,—the nobly-timbered glades, the flowing river, the stately oaks, under whose shade were picturesquely grouped the dappled deer, of which Sir Arscott was so proud—all the charms, in short, of an English landscape

of the most ornate description,—a little terrier, by whom they were usually accompanied in their walks, unluckily startled and put to flight the herd; exposing its owners to the objurgation of one of the keepers, who happened to be within view of the disturbance.

"All dogs trespassing in this park are ordered to be shot," he informed them, in language none the more gracious for being uttered by the privileged mouth-piece of a magistrate. And as the man had a gun on his shoulder, and not a grain of pity in his countenance, Lettice, considering poor Grypp as sentenced to immediate execution, burst into a passion of tears as she supplicated for the life of her favourite. When lo! a gentle voice poured oil on the stormy waves of the keeper's indignation. Helen Littlecote and her governess, Mrs. Marsden, who happened to be sketching within view of the sudden flight of the deer, kindly interfered in behalf of the offenders; and Grypp, on his return

from his inopportune chase, was consigned in safety to the arms of his anxious mistress. The keeper still protested that it was as much as his place was worth to "spare the mischievous cur." But having exacted an assurance that the offender should never again set paw on the turf of Arden Park, he condescended to be appeased.

The story of Grypp's delinquency, and of the two interesting girls in deep mourning to whom he belonged, was duly recounted to Lady Littlecote by her daughter and Mrs. Marsden, on their return home; and as she remarked only in return that it would be as well to abstain from mentioning the circumstance to Sir Arscott, who was confined to the house by indisposition, and was never more incensed than by hearing of any molestation to his deer, the governess took it for granted that her ladyship had no fault to find with the acquaintance thus accidentally made.

Several times, afterwards, they met in their

walks; and always with an interchange of courtesy. The quiet lady-like demeanour of Miss Barneson and her pupils, was well calculated to secure the favour of a sensible woman like Mrs. Marsden; who had often coveted for her young charge companionship suitable to her age.

Fortunately,—or perhaps unfortunately,—Sir Arscott's fit of the gout proved more than usually obstinate; so that, for some weeks, the attention of Lady Littlecote was wholly engrossed by his variations of health and temper. The sky of Helen's daily life was consequently sunless; and to make up to her for the loss of her mother's endearments, Mrs. Marsden often directed their walks to that portion of the park frequented by the family at the Manor.

By the time the churlish baronet regained his normal state of health and disagreeableness, something almost amounting to intimacy had arisen between the girls and their pre-

ceptresses. The spirits of the young people were vivified by the new impulse thus imparted to their lives; and many an advantageous glimpse into the mysteries of female education, was imparted by the maturer teacher to the less experienced Christina.

Direful was the wrath of Sir Arscott, however, when, early in his convalescence, the new acquaintanceship came to light. An ukase of severe prohibition was instantly issued; Mrs. Marsden threatened with dismissal on the recurrence of such an oversight; and Lady Littlecote bitterly upbraided for not having exercised a more rigorous jurisdiction.

"There was no knowing where the mischief of such a friendship might end! Low people, like these Birmingham manufacturers, had doubtless boasted all over the neighbourhood of being countenanced by the Littlecotes of Arden Hall. They would probably make it a pretext for pushing their acquaintance into spheres equally unfit for their participation.

He should take every opportunity to make known his opinion of these upstart Lamberts. Nobody should accuse *him* of having served as a stepping-stone to adventurers."

To prevent his insulting the unpretending widow who took so little thought of the pomps and vanities of life, by a letter to this effect, Lady Littlecote pledged herself to see his wishes accomplished; undertaking that no further communication should pass between Helen and the Lamberts. But, unwilling to mortify those whom she had heard so kindly spoken of, she contented herself with instructing Mrs. Marsden that, henceforward, their walks must be confined within the precincts of the pleasure-grounds. There, the innocent offenders would not venture to intrude. There, Miss Littlecote of Arden Hall might enjoy the summer sunshine without danger of encroachment.

The governess, as was her duty, obeyed. Two years' domestication at Arden Hall had

accustomed her to the tyrannies of Sir Arscott, as well as to the wifelike patience with which his lady submitted to his caprices.

Poor Helen must perforce resume her listlessness of other days;—again yearning after her lost sisters,—again incurring the danger of egotism and unchristian pride.

Perhaps,—for Mrs. Marsden was a desultory reader,—she might recal to mind the exclusive Heaven especially set apart by Emanuel Swedenborg, in the House of many mansions, for the souls of Englishmen, as essential to their notions of isolated beatitude. But neither Helen nor her instructress was seen again in the park; and vainly did Rhoda and Lettice look out for their coming, and Christina pine after the pleasant and profitable talk of Mrs. Marsden. *She* probably guessed the truth; for no entreaties of her pupils could induce her to write or send to the Hall, to ascertain that indisposition was not the cause of Miss Littlecote's non-appearance.

By judicious management, she gradually accustomed the girls to take their daily exercise elsewhere; and by Miss Barneson, no fears were entertained for the health of either of the companions who had so strangely cast them off; for every week, Helen and Mrs. Marsden made their appearance in the family pew presided over by the weeping cherubim, as blooming as ever. It was only Lady Littlecote who looked paler and paler,—sadder and sadder:—perhaps, because of the lost darlings lying in the vault under her feet; perhaps because she saw her remaining daughter condemned to perpetual estrangement from the charities and affections of life.

CHAPTER XII.

By this premature ending of a pleasant friendship, Christina was deeply mortified. She did not, however, disquiet herself in vain. It sufficed her to see her promising pupils progress daily, in grace and stature; profiting in every way by the unconstraint of country life.

Still, however, when side by side they roamed across the breezy common or shady lane, Rhoda and Lettice listened or looked

wistfully for the wheels of the Arden Hall pony carriage, or the light figure of Helen Littlecote in the distance hastening to meet them; and to have some object to be desired, is one of the best incentives to the human mind; rendering hopeful its gloomy days, and pleasanter its brightest. But instead of saying to herself, "Happy girls! who have no heavier cross to bear than the frustration of a short-lived childish friendship," Chrissy, after the fashion of those "intrusted with the tuition of youth," fancied it behoved her to "improve the occasion," by those occasional sermons, under which, when suffering under domestic calamity, or even the more trivial whips and stings which attack only the epidermis of sensitive human nature, the weak-minded are made to writhe by the strong; and occasionally, the strong by the weak, when set in authority over them.

One day, when Rhoda Lambert, after *seeming* to listen to a little governessy lecture on

the properties of the teazel-plant which bristled the adjacent hedge, and its application to manufacturing purposes, replied—"but, after all, don't you think it likely, dear Chrissy, that the Littlecote family may have left the Hall for London, or the sea side, or perhaps, to go abroad?"—Miss Barneson suddenly resolved to set the vexed question at rest.

Distinctions of class are hard to expound to those who live in utter seclusion from society; especially to girls, whose notions of patrician and plebeian are chiefly derived from the well-thumbed volumes of their Roman History. But, being a little exasperated, Miss Barneson addressed her pupils in such very plain English,—telling them it was time they should understand that their rank in life did not entitle them to become the intimate friends of a baronet's daughter; and that Sir Arscott Littlecote had interfered to forbid it,—that comprehension came at once.

"Mrs. Lambert would not like you to walk

and play with Mary Barnet, the laundress's daughter," said she. "The family at the Hall entertain the same repugnance to their inferiors."

"But Mary Barnet can neither read nor write, and is rude and vulgar," pleaded Rhoda, with flashing eyes and shortened respiration, rendering her likeness to poor Zack more than usually remarkable.

"Her deficiencies are apparent to *us*,—because we appreciate education, and prize good manners. Sir Arscott Littlecote, who cares for birth and descent as we do for intellectual refinement, is of opinion that a manufacturer's children, a tradesman's granddaughters, are unworthy to associate with those whose ancestors have enjoyed five hundred years of social distinction."

Receiving no answer from either of her startled companions, the governess proceeded to a somewhat didactic discussion of the comparative claims of Trade and Aristocracy, in a realm

still retaining its feudal institutions; better adapted to a prize essay or Athenæum lecture, than to the tender ears of sixteen. At the close, she found that Lettice hung heavily upon her arm; while Rhoda was proceeding with impetuous steps and burning cheeks, some paces in advance of them. But she was mistaken in supposing that the mind of either was edified by her homily. The only words which had struck root, she had incidentally, almost unintentionally, let fall: thoughtlessly observing, by way of corollary to her theories, "and your poor father was clearly of the same opinion. Mr. Lambert had no ambition that you should aspire beyond your natural sphere; or he would not have expressed in his will so strong a desire that one or other of you should become the wife of my brother."

A few scattered grains of rice afforded future harvests to Robinson Crusoe on his desert island. A few grains of strychnine will ex-

terminate a household. And those few careless words of Christina Barneson, decided the future fate of Rhoda and Lettice. All that, at the time, became apparent, was the languid but affectionate pressure of the younger girl who hung upon her arm, and the proud bearing of the elder, as she firmly trod the causeway. But the current of their thoughts had irretrievably changed its course.

Hitherto, Mark Barneson had been to them as a kind of uncle or godfather, who brought them birth-day or new-year's gifts,—colour-boxes, — work-boxes, — entertaining books. Whether he were young or old, ordinary or handsome, had never crossed their minds. He was the friend of their lost brother,—the representative of their dead father,—the brother of their good Chrissy. It would have appeared a sort of sacrilege, had any one ventured to criticise him in person, word, or deed. He was the Providence of the house. His arrival was a signal for general joy.

Their poor mother became cheerful,—the servants active,—Christina indulgent. Mark was all in all.

But now, he had become far more than all this. He was the hero of their romance. One or other of them would be his wife. Did this depend on *his* choice or their own? Was his election already made, or had their mother decided it? Neither of them breathed to the other one syllable denoting that Chrissy's announcement had reached her ear. But each pondered over it,—how earnestly—how wonderingly,—in her heart.

Instead of the headlong haste with which, heretofore, on the announcement of Barneson's unexpected arrival at the Manor, they had hurried from their schoolroom to greet him, they now hung back; and when summoned by their mother, tarried to adjust their dress, or smooth their hair; greeting him at last with a shy consciousness which betrayed in their troubled glances and

heightened colour, the stir of their young hearts.

Unaware, on the other hand, that the circumstance, which it had been decided was to be kept secret till the maturity of the girls, and on which, at present, he never allowed himself to dwell, had prematurely transpired, Mark attributed to his sister's sense of decorum, their altered demeanour. They were no longer children. They were on the confines of womanhood. It was natural—it was fitting —that they should become more reserved.

At the period of their instalment at the Manor house, which was engaged for a term of years, Mrs. Lambert had proposed that they should spend their winters in Birmingham. But as Christmas drew near, she intimated a desire to remain in the country. She assigned no motive for her change of plans. But to Christina's observant eye, it was evident that Rhoda Lambert, who, by her more energetic character, and perhaps from her strong

resemblance to the lost and lamented son, was obtaining great influence over her mother, had instigated the determination.

The only surprise it occasioned in the family was the fact that it met with no opposition from Mark. Instead of expressing regret that he was to lose their society and pass a solitary winter, he candidly signified his approval of Mrs. Lambert's preference of a country life.

"Their absence from Bracknell Works," he added, "would enable him to rebuild, or remodel the old dwelling-house, no longer proportioned to the extent of the property. When the business-premises were completed by the late Mr. Lambert, and the new engine-houses erected, he had deferred for a time the construction of a family residence suitable to his increased income. The plans then furnished were still in his hands."

The girls listened with embarrassed countenances; convinced that his object was to

create a pleasant home for his future wife; while Mrs. Lambert and Christina secretly congratulated themselves that of the old house, so full of grievous associations, not a brick would be left upon the other.

When, shortly afterwards, the work of demolition commenced, the additional occupation and anxiety thus entailed upon Mark, afforded a sufficient excuse for the brevity of his letters and rarity of his visits. "The builders required constant overlooking." When he *did* come, it was usually to consult Mrs. Lambert concerning some change in the internal arrangements of the new house. But as he invariably expressed a wish that her daughters should take part in the family council, each felt convinced that *her* taste and inclinations were consulted in every alteration. To one sister, this idea gave pain; to the other, pleasure; to both, perplexity. Throughout those long winter months, though not a syllable was exchanged on the subject, the

edifice slowly rising at the Bracknell Works, with its stone staircase and airy, well-proportioned rooms, was to each a castle in the air.

Early in the spring, in consequence of a holiday accorded to Miss Barneson, that she might visit W., to be present at the wedding of her only surviving younger sister, they were left alone with their mother. But even then, neither of them found courage to elucidate her future prospects.

But the mystery observed on the subject was detrimental to both. Poor Lettice became duller and sadder for the misgivings of her mind; while Rhoda, naturally arrogant, could scarcely repress her indignation at the idea of being left to the refusal of her father's former clerk. She had never before thought of him in so ungenerous a light. Till she entered her sixteenth year, he had been her "dear Mark Barneson." But it now recurred to her mind, only too often, that the head of

the house of Lambert and Co. would, but for her father's generous predilection, have remained a pauper:—the same pauper, who, during her brother's lifetime, wore a threadbare coat and inhabited a servant's attic.

The tradesman's daughter, in short, thoroughly despised the tradesman's son. We attribute the sin of pride too exclusively to the rich and great. Some of the poorest and humblest born of God's creatures, are the proudest. Highlanders, even when half-starved, are innately haughty; and an Irish beggar is sometimes as scornful as an Emperor. Rhoda Lambert was as thoroughly embued with contempt for a condition of life which in her own case provoked that of Sir Arscott Littlecote, as though born to ermine and purple.

When Christina returned from W., and alluded exultingly to the good fortune of her portionless sister in becoming the wife of a retired linendraper, Rhoda had no patience

with her mother's interest in the details of the new *ménage;* their pleasant villa at Bishopstoke, and the "neat sociable" that was to enable them to visit, almost daily, the poor old lady at St. Margaret's College, which, in spite of the solicitations of her son on his accession of fortune, she had resolutely refused to quit.

As little could the proud girl support the delight with which Lettice welcomed the announcement that occasionally reached them from Mark, of the increasing business of the firm of Lambert and Co: the new contracts proposed to them, the new patents they obtained. Just as some people rejoice to see the name they love recorded with honour in the annals of the world,—in the great letters of the public journals,—in the court circular, or some popular review,—did Lettice Lambert triumph in knowing that those of Lambert and Co. were current in the markets of St. Petersburg, New York, Calcutta, Rio Janeiro; engraven

on engines which wrought the fortune of hundreds, and patent implements which lightened the labours of thousands. She gloried in hearing of a district reclaimed from the sea, or a province restored to health per aid of their draining engines. Such was *her* pride: as harmless, at all events, as that of Sir Arscott Littlecote in his illegible parchments and monumental brasses.

It was no sordid motive that influenced her feelings. The Lambert girls, reared in seclusion, understood little of the value and influence of riches. Their only sample of the life of the luxurious classes, consisted in a glimpse of Arden Hall—of the interior of which they knew scarcely more than of the pyramids;—and the wealth of the Littlecotes appeared to them as much the result of immutable inheritance, as the right divine of the throne. To acquire similar possessions by industry or adroit investment, they would have held as fabulous an enterprise as that of the Titans.

All Lettice desired, in short, was, that the name her father had created, should be placed at the head of its class.

But while *she* sat and listened,

> silent as a nun
> Breathless with adoration,

while Mark read aloud to his co-executrix the complimentary letters which had accompanied across the Atlantic certain remittances of bills of exchange from Boston and New Orleans; or recounted to her some advantageous bargain he had made in the mineral market, his elder ward, though seemingly engrossed in counting the stitches of her tapestry or drawing threads in her strip of muslin, was noting with disgust the provincial dialect of her guardian. Mark had never quite got rid of the accent acquired at Ryecroft Farm; though he spoke plain strong English, homely but thoroughly to the purpose, his misplaced aspirations jarred against an ear which the harmonious language of Mrs. Marsden and

the pure enunciation of Helen, had rendered fastidious. In former days she had found no fault with the "'oliday" procured for her by Mark. But she could scarcely refrain from shrugging her shoulders when he talked about the new "'ouse," the completion of which occupied all the attention he could spare from the important works in progress at the Foundry. When finished, six months were allotted for the drying and seasoning of the new structure before it could be furnished, for habitation; so that, for a year to come, the establishment at Arden was to remain on its usual footing.

All were content. Christina was, as she fancied, engaged in completing *her* work;—the furnishing and polishing of the two young minds, in which she had unwittingly sowed tares as well as wheat; while Mrs. Lambert, who had recovered sufficient strength to saunter out daily in fine weather and make acquaintance with all the rheumatics and raggednesses of the village, was beginning to

feel far more at home at Arden than she had ever been in the stony, bustling ways of her native town. There is a small-ware benevolence in which elderly country-ladies are apt to deal, with as much satisfaction as London ladies in the busy idleness of shopping: the former turning over the wants, ailments, and scruples of the poor, as the latter the ribbons and laces of reluctant haberdashers; and after administering weak broth and weak counsel, blankets and reproofs, returning home to their easy chairs, rich dishes, and forced fruit, with the flattering unction laid to their souls of having progressed a furlong on the road to Heaven.

Poor Mrs. Lambert not only accomplished, but thoroughly enjoyed her mission. She gave liberally and listened patiently; and not a sprained ankle or convulsed infant in the village, escaped her kindly intervention. Even had she been aware how gracelessly her beneficence was received, and how far more

prized was the dole of sixpence from Arden Hall, than the halfcrowns of the "Brummagem folk," it would not have ruffled her temper, or impeded her mercies.

But it was otherwise with her elder daughter. When the scornful epithet, unluckily overheard, was warningly repeated to her by Miss Barneson, Rhoda Lambert vowed a vow in her heart of hearts, not only that she would never again bestow a doit on such ingrates; but that to the city to which even an obscure village held itself superior, she would return no more. Rather sit like the banished Peri at the gates of Paradise,—rather wander away her young days within view of the delicious glades of Arden Park, with the Elizabethan chimneys of the Hall rising imperiously above its ancient oaks,—than live among tradesmen and manufacturers, amidst the smoke, uproar, evil savours, and vexatious contentions of the Bracknell Works.

Sufficient was the annoyance of hearing

tidings of these things, when Barneson, and occasionally even Ferrier, (who was supposed to be working his way to a share in the firm of Lambert and Co.,) arrived at the Manor House for a Sunday visit. Whenever it was possible, she pleaded indisposition as a pretext for avoiding their company. When forced to endure it, she sat storing up disgusts and harsh determinations for her future guidance.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE aversion, apparently, was not mutual.

"Black eyes or blue?" inquired Ferrier jocosely, one evening, of Mark, as they were driving back to Birmingham, after a summer day spent with the family at Arden. "It is almost time you made up your mind between them, to enable the future Mrs. Barneson to select the paper and curtains for the new drawing-room!"

With perfect candour did Mark assure his companion that he troubled himself as little about black eyes or blue, as about the choice of drawing-room carpets. The 180-horse power engine, about to be despatched to Odessa, occupied all his thoughts.

"Tell that to the Marines," cried Ferrier, who had been indulging in an extra glass of sherry. "At all events, pretty little Lettice evidently fancies that her handsome sister is the object of your preference."

"You have no right to interpret the innocent words and looks of a mere child," interrupted Barneson. "To me, both are like sisters,—almost like daughters."

"Then the sooner you modify your views, the better," retorted Ferrier. "To deal frankly with you, Barneson, however undecided may be *your* mind, I have made up *mine* that whichever of those two girls you reject, shall become the wife of a certain Alexander Ferrier."

"*Yours?*"—reiterated Mark, with an air of such utter amazement, as was almost insulting.

"Mine.—And why not?—Though by her father's will no part of his capital is to be withdrawn from the business during the life-time of his daughters, I shall be quite content with Rhoda and a third of the profits. Upwards of four thousand, last year! With my wife's income of fifteen hundred, my own salary, and the trifle allowed me by my uncle, we might snap our fingers at half the swells in Birmingham."

"It was not money I was thinking of—"

"Of what else, then?"

"Miss Lambert sets no mean value on herself. I have sometimes fancied she aspired to—"

"To what?—*My* connections are fifty-fold better than hers. The Ferriers stand somewhat higher at Glasgow, you'll find, than these Lamberts in Birmingham. I doubt indeed whether my uncle, Ferrier of Craigie, would

consent to receive into the family a girl whose brother died in jail, and so escaped the gallows."

Mark Barneson felt the blood rush to his face. Till that moment, he was unaware that the sad end of the unfortunate Zack had transpired.

"I shall do my best, however," resumed Ferrier, "to make him overlook that little blot in the Lambert scutcheon; and, when I have succeeded, I trust, Mark, I shall meet with no obstruction from you in making my court to the young lady?"

"If you are so fortunate as to be approved by either of them, and Mrs. Lambert should make no objection, none will be raised by *me*," replied Mark, coldly. He was thoroughly taken by surprise. It had scarcely occurred to him that Ferrier would cherish so mercenary a project. For mercenary it was. His intention to marry either sister, after Mark had exercised his privilege of choice, proved

an utter absence of preference. Unobservant as he was, Mark had always attributed the interest evinced by Ferrier in the sayings and doings of Arden Manor, to a lingering affection for Christina. Ferrier had never professed any change of sentiments; nor was a brother's partial eye likely to discover that the woman of thirty had a poor chance against the blooming faces of her pupils; or that Chrissy was growing quizzical, methodical, old-maidish; that early trouble had withered her features, and embittered her heart, while school-room habits imparted a repellent stiffness to her deportment. To Mark, she was still the dear Chrissy of his boyhood; and he felt as much vexed on his sister's account, as on his own. Nor was he pleased at hearing his wards called "Rhoda," and "Lettice," by a man like Ferrier.

"In short, Mark," resumed the object of his indignant cogitations, after an embarrassed pause,—"I have your sanction to apply to

Mrs. Lambert for leave to pay my addresses to her eldest daughter?"

"I told you before, Ferrier," rejoined Barneson peevishly, "that I consider them both too young for the momentous question of matrimony. Wait at least till September, the birthday of the younger sister.—Then, you can acquaint their mother with your views. Whatever Miss Lambert may decide, will meet with no obstacle from me."

They accomplished the remainder of their short journey in silence, and not in particularly good conceit with each other:—Ferrier, convinced that Barneson was secretly opposed to his projects; Barneson, suspecting that Ferrier had been simply endeavouring to sound the choice of his heart.

Next morning, he began to examine the arrangements of the new house with a degree of interest they had not heretofore excited in his mind. But whether it were a vision of Miss Lambert's striking face and fine figure

that floated before his mind's eye as presiding in the handsome dining-room: or whether the sweet countenance of Lettice haunted him in the sunny upper-room which the builder had pointed out as an excellent nursery, who can say?—Certain it is, that at the close of his investigations, he had resolved to communicate to Mrs. Lambert the projects of the future partner in the firm of Lambert and Co., in order to obtain some insight into the views of the family. Whether to write or speak on a subject so delicate, was the only point that remained to decide.

He was still revolving the question, though apparently engaged in the contemplation of a very business-looking folio, covered with figures and diagrams, that lay on the desk before him in the private counting-house to which he had retired to take counsel with himself, when a loud tap at the door distracted his attention. —"A letter by express!"—a very unusual occurrence at the foundry.

Let us hope that the tremulousness of his hand, when outstretched to receive the missive, regarded the health and safety of his poor old mother at W.—But the anxiety depicted in his face as he perused it, certainly reached no further than the village of Arden! Thither, as clearly as Mrs. Lambert's feeble handwriting and prolix style availed to expound her wishes, he was immediately to despatch Mr. Brathwaite, the eminent surgeon who had attended the last moments of her husband.—"A terrible accident had occurred, almost at the moment of his departure the preceding night. Her daughter," she did not at first mention *which*, "had experienced a fall which was supposed to have produced only a few contusions and a sprained ankle; for Mr. Royd, the Arden apothecary, had assured them that a week's confinement to a sofa would be the worst result. But during the night, considerable swelling of the hip had arisen, attended with much fever, and it was

clear that there was dislocation, if not fracture. Royd requested further advice.

"Mr. Brathwaite must not delay a moment more than is necessary, after this reaches you," was added by way of postscript to the letter, in the clear though crabbed handwriting of Christina. "Poor pretty little Lettice is suffering terribly. Royd has put her to much unnecessary torture. If possible, see him off."

"Poor pretty little Lettice!"—Yes—from the moment of opening the letter, he had surmised it. And, had he been still in doubt concerning the nature of his sentiments towards his two wards, the throbbing of his heart and mistiness of his sight, as he snatched up his hat to rush out in search of the Brodie of Birmingham, would have enlightened him on the subject. "See Mr. Brathwaite off?"—As if he would lose sight of him till he entered the sick room!—

So effectually, in fact, did Barneson exert himself in the discharge of his commission,

that, within three hours, the smoking posters that conveyed them together to Arden Manor, drew up before the porch where, only the preceding night, Christina and Mrs. Lambert had bad him farewell.

The intelligence afforded by the servants was far from cheering. "Miss Lettice was worse. Miss Lettice had fainted twice from excess of pain."—Long indeed appeared the hour to Mark, during which Brathwaite was examining his patient; and when at length he quitted her, it was only for a consultation with Royd, from which non-professionals were excluded. Mark did, however, contrive to gather from a passing word that the case was a serious one; dislocation, aggravated by a simple fracture, which it had been necessary immediately to reduce.

"I am now at your service to return to Birmingham, Mr. Barneson," said Brathwaite, after a quarter of an hour's conference with

the local sawbones, to whom he issued his final instructions.

"But surely you will not leave the house, sir, without seeing Miss Lambert again?" rejoined Mark, indignant at the cheerfulness with which the two doctors took leave of each other, and the air of superiority with which Brathwaite was rubbing his hands.

"I have nothing further to do here, my dear sir. A sedative has been administered; and the young lady must not be disturbed. A few hours rest is the only thing to be of service just now." Then, perceiving that Mark looked bewildered and harassed, he quietly rang and ordered the chaise.

Barneson would have given worlds for courage to bid him return alone. To leave the spot where "poor pretty little Lettice" was lying maimed and suffering,—perhaps,—so little was he skilled in chirurgery,—perhaps in danger,—was a hard trial. But there was no pretext for remaining. Brathwaite had

announced that the quieter the house, the better for the patient. "He would himself return on the morrow, if the family judged it necessary; but he assured Mrs. Lambert that now the bone was set, her daughter would do equally well under the care of Royd."

The utmost Mark could do, in mitigation of his anxiety, was to obtain a few minutes' interview with his sister. But Christina, worn with her night's watching, was for once nervous and in tears. He could only extort from her that Lettice had suffered sadly, but with the utmost fortitude. The origin of the accident seemed difficult to explain. The poor girl said she had missed her footing in jumping from a high staircase window-seat, to which no one knew why she had mounted. She had been found insensible at the foot of the stairs. It was not till some time afterwards they discovered that she was unable to stand.

"I will write by this evening's post to let

you know how she is going on," said Chrissy, who, wanted on all sides, had no leisure to bestow upon his interrogations. "Should any unfavourable change occur, it will be better to apprise Mr. Brathwaite."

How much of the value of a phrase depends upon time and place!—Mark recollected well that during Mr. Lambert's last illness, an "unfavourable change" was used as a term of courtesy to indicate increased danger; and, finally, the approach of death.—Perhaps they had not told him the worst!—

But that those who are feeling strongly, seldom argue clearly, he must have been satisfied, on his journey home, by the surgeon's repeated re-assurances, that Lettice was in no sort of danger. A new source of anxiety was opened, however, before they parted.—

"A sweet little creature!" said Brathwaite, after circumstantially discussing the state of his patient. "One can hardly understand so dry and rough a fellow as old Lambert being

father to such a child,—a primrose at the foot of an oak tree. The elder girl is strikingly handsome, but harsh as a crab. This unfortunate child is as soft as swan's down."

The word "unfortunate" again jarred upon the ear of Lettice's guardian!—

"But you said just now, Mr. Brathwaite, that you entertained no fears concerning her ultimate recovery?"

"None,—none whatever. The contusion on the head is slight,—of no manner of consequence. But—" He paused, as if afraid of committing himself.

"But—*what?*—But *what?*"

"You are the young lady's guardian, I believe.—You were one of the executors, if I recollect rightly, appointed by old Lambert's will?"

Barneson, too much agitated to speak, nodded assent.

"In that case, I need have no scruple in acquainting you that his daughter runs con-

siderable risk of being lame for life. That Arden fellow, Royd, who, as regards operations, is scarcely qualified for a vet., took upon himself some hours before our arrival to set the limb. I trust I may not have been too late to remedy the evil. But it is more than probable that the injured leg will ultimately be shorter than the other. Impossible to say at present. Impossible to be certain for some weeks to come."

This prognostication, dire as it was, was better than danger. All Mark Barneson cared for, in the first flurry of his fears, was to be certified that she would live,—that she would be free from pain.—Poor pretty little Lettice, —who had never cherished an unkindly thought or feeling since she was born;—Lettice, the perpetual sunshine of the house!—

Still, could anyone have penetrated his feelings when, in the course of the sleepless night that followed, he suddenly took it into his head to revisit the new house, and wander through

the rooms he had that morning examined in so different a mood, it might have appeared that the idea of that young and fair-faced creature visiting the nursery on a crutch, or limping with pain and difficulty through the spacious hall, was a grievous check upon his visions of domestic happiness.

A few days afterwards, when Brathwaite, by previous agreement, accompanied him on a second visit to the Manor House, though in the interim a daily bulletin from Royd and letter from Chrissy, had announced that all was proceeding favourably, the change in Barneson's appearance was too remarkable to escape the experienced eye of the surgeon.

"What the deuce is the matter with you, my good friend?" cried he, as soon as he had taken his seat in the chaise. "Have *you* too been tumbling down stairs, and breaking your head, or heart?—You look like a ghost.—Let me feel your pulse. Irritable and feverish!

Anything amiss among the nailers ?—I'm sure that sharp-faced foreman of yours, who stopped me just now to inquire my opinion of Miss Lambert's case,—(Farrier, Ferrier,—what's his name ?)—don't look as if *he* went in fear of Basinghall Street !"—

Poor Mark endeavoured to laugh off the charge. But a sickly smile was all he could muster. Good news, however, awaited him at Arden. Lettice was proceeding as well as possible. The anxieties of the family were at end.

For to them, nothing had been communicated of the contingent mischief. They saw that sweet face smiling again, though its bloom was for a time extinguished ; and Mrs. Lambert returned thanks to God, and Christina resumed her rigid rationality. Alone, of the elated household, Rhoda exhibited little emotion. Perhaps because that of Mark was so much too visibly betrayed.

After this second visit, he had no pretext

for an early return; for the delicacies he was careful to procure for the invalid, were readily forwarded. At the close of ten days, however, he could no longer control his impatience. A few personal inquiries of Christina or Miss Lambert, might set his mind at ease concerning the terrible surmises of Brathwaite. — At all events, he would endeavour to procure a private interview with Dr. Royd, and ascertain the worst.

It struck him,—it might be fancy,—that on more than one occasion, Ferrier contrived to impede his purposed visit, by making peremptory business-appointments in his name; or accelerating important works or castings, at which it was essential he should preside. At last, however, came the long-anticipated vacant afternoon; and on this occasion, he took care not to start from home, lest, like John Gilpin of immortal renown, his day's pleasure should be marred by the arrival of customers. It is not quite impossible that he

might be allowed a glimpse of "poor, pretty little Lettice;" in which anticipation, how pleasant to his eyes were the gleams of September sunshine that barred or flecked the broad green pastures as he drove along;—how freshly blew the pure air upon his cheek, after the smoky sulphureous exhalations of the city he had left behind!

In the little cosy book-room overlooking the garden whose parterres were radiant with china-asters and salvias, into which he was ushered, he found Rhoda Lambert seated before the writing table. Flinging down her pen at the announcement of his name, she turned a flushed and angry face towards the intruder.

"Yes!—Better, much better.—Progressing charmingly.—I know what it is you are come to ask," cried she, forestalling his questions.—"I was writing to you, Mr. Barneson. Not to tell you *that;* but to inquire whether it is really under sanction of your authority that

my late father's foreman has taken the liberty to make me an offer of his hand?"

"Ferrier has broken his promise, then? —Ferrier has written to you?" said he, taking the seat to which she somewhat haughtily pointed.

"It is at least satisfactory to find that you did not authorise him to molest me at such a time,—in the midst of our family anxieties! But even if better-timed, his addresses are, in my estimation, little better than an insult. A man nearly double my age, without one grace of mind or person to recommend him; —a man who scarcely knows me by sight— who scarcely knows me by name,—and proposes the match on the same mercenary terms he would drive a bargain in pig-iron!—"

She paused—apparently for want of breath; for a minute afterwards she added,—and so pointedly that it appeared as if she were including Mark himself in her admonition,— "I will thank you, Mr. Barneson, to acquaint

this person that, with my own will, I will never again set foot in Birmingham :—that I would rather enjoy my freedom in the poorest cottage in Arden, than live in Bracknell Works the prison-life which has been the lot of my mother. He tells me—(I thank him at least for that information) that, on coming of age my sister and myself will each be entitled to a provision of more than fifteen hundred a-year. With such prospects, neither Lettice nor I need sacrifice the enjoyments and refinements of life, for the honour of remaining attached to the firm of Lambert and Co."

But for her inclusion of the name of Lettice in her harangue, the scornful beauty might have proceeded, without provoking either anger or reply.

"Ferrier has done wrong, Miss Lambert," said he, "to address you without the knowledge of your mother, your natural guardian; and at a moment when your mind is agitated by family distress.—But that his situation in

life debars him from offering you his hand, I do not admit. His abilities, which are first-rate, his industry and energy, which are remarkable, have already laid the foundations of his fortune, in a line of business to which your parents did not hold themselves superior—"

An impatient gesture from his ward stimulated his courage to speak on.

"And that your father, to whom you are indebted for the wealth of which you speak so boastfully, had no desire that it should inspire his daughters with the ambition to shine in a sphere higher than his own, was evinced in the generous desire expressed in his last moments, that one or other of them should become my wife."

Again, the displeasure of Rhoda was but too visibly demonstrated.

"Mr. Lambert had an honest pride in his condition of life. He fancied it the happiest and safest;—the foundation of domestic virtue, the path to a better life. On what experience

you have grounded a different opinion, I will not inquire."

"You need not,—for I do not admit your personal interest in the matter," interrupted Rhoda, with increasing irritation. "My mother is, as you justly observe, my natural guardian. It belongs to her to reprove me when my sentiments are unbecoming, or my morals faulty. You, Mr. Barneson, are intrusted with the care of the pecuniary interests of the family. I am indebted to your sister for my education,—the scanty education, purporting to qualify me for a tradesman's wife! But I look to myself for the rest. I am now old enough to think, act, study, on my own account. My mother will take care that I do nothing unbecoming the class of whose duties you think so highly. The only motive of my explaining all this—forced out of my heart, as it has been by Mr. Ferrier's letter,—is, that you may spare me the annoyance of replying to him. As my father's representative, I will

thank you to let him know how completely he misapprehends my tastes and his own attractions."

She rose as if about to leave the room. But Barneson chose to be heard.

"Such a message it would be useless for me to convey," said he, firmly. "Ferrier would never believe that it was authorised by yourself. A few lines from Mrs. Lambert, or from your own hand, would be conclusive."

"My mother is too much shaken by her attention on poor Lettice, to be troubled with my affairs; nor would she at any time express herself as strongly as I could wish. Were I to write myself, it would be in such terms that you would scarcely like to be the bearer of my letter. Perhaps, after all, silence is the best reply."

"Not unless you wish him to appear here in person, and exact one."

"I am not afraid," rejoined the young lady, looking him resolutely in the face. "Into

this house, Mr. Ferrier shall never obtain an entrance. He has no right to intrude upon us. My mother shall never submit to ——"

"Do what you will on your own account. But leave Mrs. Lambert to the suggestions of her womanly nature and Christian spirit," interrupted Mark, sternly. "Ferrier is not a man to be insulted. Ferrier is not a man to be trifled with. He would be a dangerous enemy. He is a pillar of strength to your worldly interests——"

"For once let us overlook mercenary calculations," rejoined the haughty girl. "For once, let Lambert and Co. be forgotten.— What have I otherwise to fear from Mr. Ferrier?"—

It was not for Mark to appal her by describing the vindictive character of the man, or the nature of the family secrets in his keeping. Luckily, perhaps, for both, Christina made her appearance, with an intimation from Mrs. Lambert that she would be happy to see her guest

in the dressing-room to which the invalid had been that morning removed; a notice which instantly put to flight all the anxieties, all the resentments of her brother.

The flushed cheeks of Rhoda, and the agitated air of Mark, when her entrance interrupted their interview, had not, however, escaped her. Mark had probably been tempted into a premature elucidation of Miss Lambert's sentiments towards him. But what had been the result?—Unfavourable, she feared; if the knitted brows of the only too congenial sister of poor Zack, or the crest-fallen looks of her brother, were to be trusted as indications.

But she had no time for surmises. Already, Mark was hurrying up the stairs that led to the presence of "poor pretty little Lettice."

It was like emerging from a gloomy chamber closed during a thunder storm, into the open sunshine of a fragrant lawn, to escape from the forbidding face of Rhoda Lambert to the gentle presence of her sister.

Thinner and paler was the invalid than his worst anticipations had foreseen; but she held out her wasted hand so kindly, and her deep blue eyes, contrasted with the white pillows which supported her, looked so like gentian-flowers on snow, that, in the eyes of her guardian, she appeared more than beautiful. It was well that he had to stoop over her as he pressed in his rough swarthy palm the hand whose fragility so appalled him; or even the purblind Mrs. Lambert must have noticed the heavy tears falling from his eyes.

His utmost self-government was taxed to restrain himself from falling on his knees beside her, and explaining all he had suffered on her account, and all he was venturing to hope from her recovery. Not that he feared to render his uncouthness and fervour a matter of derision to his child-love. He had too much faith in the sweetness of her nature. But he dreaded to agitate her still feeble frame,

or ruffle by emotion that soft and placid countenance.

On recovering some degree of self-possession, Mark found himself undergoing Mrs. Lambert's prolix recital of her hopes and fears by since their last interview; — accompanied lamentations that poor dear little Lettice should have been so severely punished for her thoughtlessness in climbing up to the window-seat of the South landing, to witness his and Mr. Ferrier's departure. "You could not have reached the end of the lane," observed the *naïve* old lady, "when the accident occurred."

A faint streak of bloom tinged the cheeks of Lettice while entreating her mother to recur no more to that unlucky evening. "Let us all forget it," she said. "Let us talk of something pleasanter to Mark."

As if anything could be pleasanter than to be called "Mark" by that feeble voice, so shortly after Rhoda had haughtily apostrophised him

as " Mr. Barneson."—As if any possible public or private news could vie in *his* estimation with the intelligence of the origin of the accident unwittingly communicated by Mrs. Lambert !—

CHAPTER XIV.

The convalescence of poor Lettice was slow, but sure. The possibility of eventual lameness was known only to Mark. But though the point could not be decided till the patient recovered strength to touch the ground, the surgeon's apprehensions grew stronger and stronger as the limb became more firmly knit.

To Brathwaite, it was incomprehensible why the young guardian, in whom it was easy to see the young lover and foresee a future

husband, should be so averse to a premature avowal of his fears. Staid and practical, like most professional men, he was not likely to surmise that Barneson wished to afford to the suffering girl the satisfaction of bestowing her heart and hand without the drawback of knowing that she was to be an infirm and ailing wife; and with so much delicacy did he eventually time his proposals, that he was accepted, and Lettice had admitted that every hope and wish of her heart was fulfilled in their engagement, before it was disclosed to her, or her family, that, henceforward, she would be unable to walk without assistance or the use of a crutch.

To the poor girl herself, the blow was consequently lightened. Lame or active, she knew that to her dear guardian she was an object of adoration; and that she was about to pass a peaceful happy life under his care. And though Mrs. Lambert, accustomed to look upon wives, in the abstract, as active, useful

household assistants, conscientiously suggested that her intended son-in-law, if desirous to rescind his trothplight, ought to be released from his engagement, Lettice listened only with a smile. Before Mark uttered a syllable in reply, she knew that he had from the first foreseen her misfortune ; and that, even had it come upon him unawares, he would have regarded her infirmity only as an additional claim to his protection. Who would watch so tenderly over "poor pretty little Lettice" as one who had known and loved her from her earliest childhood, and understood all her ways and wishes ?—

If anything, meanwhile, could have increased the disgust with which Rhoda contemplated the alliance, it would have been the almost grateful satisfaction expressed by her mother. Mrs. Lambert, who seemed to think that her sole-remaining duty on earth was to conform strictly to every former wish of the husband who was no longer at hand to advise and

guide, was overjoyed that a man so well principled as Barneson was to assume his place. In Mark, she recognised prudence personified,—prudence, the favourite cardinal virtue of the middle classes. With Mark, she had no reserves, —no mistrusts. In boyhood, he had been the chum of poor Zack; in manhood, the elected friend of poor Zack's father; and thankful was she to providence for decreeing that on one so exemplary, she was to depend for the happiness of her afflicted child. Not all the bitternesses her elder daughter had to urge against him, availed in the smallest degree to warp the mother's better judgment. She could not be persuaded even to defer her sanction to the event. As soon as the new house was furnished, and poor Lettice's strength equal to the removal, the marriage was to be solemnised.

Rhoda, meanwhile, proved as good, or rather as bad, as her word. Though the infirmity of her sister in some degree mitigated the case, she was as bent as ever on rescuing her

from a position in life which she regarded with abhorrence.

"You fancy you like this man, dear Lettice," she pleaded with intemperate earnestness, as soon as her sister was well enough to be drawn through the shrubberies, in the luxurious little garden-chair provided for her by Mark; stationed in which, under a spreading oak-tree overlooking the flower beds, she could enjoy the fragrance of the garden. "But whom else have you seen?—With whom can you compare him—except that mercenary drudge, that vulgar Ferrier, or Mr. Hanson our drawing-master? Wait a little, dear sister—only wait a little and see something of the world,—before you pledge yourself for life."

"Whom could I ever know so well, or who would ever be half so kind and patient with me as Mark?" rejoined the gentler sister. "I cannot recollect the time when he was not one of the family. Instead of going to a new

home and roughing it among strangers, I shall live always,—always,—among my old friends, and all that has been familiar to me from a child."

"And have you so poor a spirit as to content yourself with this?—Have you no desires beyond that humdrum mode of life,—those dreary walks,—that noisy, vulgar yard, with its reek of oil and gas,—that utter absence of all the pleasures of life?"—

"I have known nothing better, and I have been always happy. We seem to belong to Birmingham. Our family is respected there. And what pleasure am I likely to find elsewhere, greater than that of a peaceful fireside, with dear Mark to share it with me?"

"*Dear Mark!* A man without refinement or ambition,—a man to whom money-making is the one sole object in life!—Business—nothing but business!"

"My father expressly desired that the Bracknell Works should be carried on. One

or other of us, therefore, *must* marry a man capable of conducting them."

"By no means. My father left it optional with ourselves. Our fortunes are embarked in the Foundry. But marry as we may, the Bracknell firm must pay us two-thirds of their profits. While living with my mother, this is opulence. In any class of life, it would be accounted a liberal dowry."

"So much the better," was Lettice's prompt reply. "It will enable Mark to finish the new house according to his wishes."

"The new house—the new house!"—cried Rhoda impatiently. "With such a sky over its roof,—such an atmosphere around it,—what matter furniture or decoration? And to abide there for life,—no change—no prospect! Lettice,—darling Lettice,—think better of it. You seem almost to fancy that Mark Barneson, the creature of my father's bounties, condescends in taking you for a wife!"

"It is certainly generous on his part to

overlook the certainty of my being a troublesome companion."

"But it is by no means *certain*. I sometimes suspect that he and Brathwaite between them, planned the alarm, only to scare you into the marriage;—perhaps, at the suggestion of Christina."

"Planned it?—You have forgotten, then, the high opinion entertained by my father of Mr. Brathwaite? As to Mark, a truer hearted, a more candid person does not exist, Chrissy, too, may have her faults. She is, perhaps, a little arbitrary. But she would not stoop to a falsehood, to gain a kingdom."

"Falsehood or no falsehood, let it be put thoroughly to the test. Why not consult the most eminent London surgeons? Some more efficient remedy might be suggested than has occurred to these provincial practitioners."

"If I thought so, for the sake of poor Mark,

I would indeed make the trial," rejoined Lettice, gravely. "But I am convinced that everything has been done for me that science could effect.—If it be the will of God that I am to be lame, I am resigned. Every misfortune has its compensations.—My husband will perhaps love me the better for knowing me to be so dependent on his mercy."

There was clearly no help for it!—Rhoda was forced to admit that the spirit of her sister had been drilled into such slavish subservience, that redemption was hopeless. —Bracknell Foundry must be her home; Mark Barneson her hero!—

It was no small comfort to her to learn, as the autumn waned and the preliminaries of the new household were adjusted, that Christina was to become the permanent inmate of the young couple. Her domestication in the house would spare a world of trouble to the still delicate bride; and her departure from the Manor House, spare a world of annoyance to

the aspiring Rhoda; who, of an age to be freed from her control, felt that, once alone with her mother, she should obtain complete ascendancy in the house. Nor could she forgive Christina for having predestined her to be the wife of her brother—(the governess's brother !)—educating her with the exclusive view to becoming a Birmingham tradeswoman, —to cast accounts,—reckon wages,—and calculate the rise and fall of the iron-market !

Rhoda flattered herself she was born to nobler things.

It almost consoled the haughty girl for hearing poor dear little Lettice hailed on her wedding-day as "Mrs. Barneson," and seeing her set off on her bridal tour to the Isle of Wight, in company with a man to whom the graces and garnish of life appeared frivolous and vexatious, to know that her sister-in-law was already preparing for her reception at the Bracknell Works ; and that a new era was about to commence in the annals of Arden. Who

could say, but that the man she had herself rejected in terms so defiant,—the presumptuous Ferrier,—might re-transfer his allegiance to Miss Barneson, and thus complete their domestic circle, and the prosperity of the firm !—The proud eye of Rhoda sparkled as she reflected how admirably Christina was qualified for such a destiny : and what ample exercise her governmental faculties would find in legislating for the wives and families of the workmen.

Her own first object, meanwhile, was to prepare for a higher sphere of action.

In another year, as soon as her mother was in some degree emancipated from former trammels, she hoped to induce her to travel ;—to visit that wondrous metropolis of which, ever since her intimacy with Helen Littlecote, she had been dreaming, as of fairy land.

Now that the yoke of the Barnesons was broken, and the tyranny of Christina overpast, every thing was to be hoped for ; and, under the excitement of such expectations, she set

about a labour of self-culture, undreamed of in Christina's homely schoolroom, with its slates and Tutor's Assistants,—its Simson and Keightley.—Her homely parent, surprised to perceive that she found in her books and easel a sufficient substitute for her sister's society, had no fault to find with occupations so harmless.

At first, the conquest of personal independence sufficed her. A little later, her influence over the feeble mind of her mother, was exercised, with the aid of Dr. Royd, and much talk about the injurious consequences of sulphureous exhalations to persons suffering from bronchial irritability, to persuade the inert old lady to defer, till spring, her promised visit to the new house. Before April, some auspicious accident might intervene, to second Miss Lambert's determination never again to set foot in Birmingham.

It was fortunate meanwhile for herself, and satisfactory to her sedentary parent, that the

park and pleasure-grounds of Arden Hall had become once more accessible. The family was gone abroad,—the establishment broken up. A short time previous to Lettice's accident, the Littlecotes had proceeded to Vichy, at the instigation of one of those fashionable gout-doctors, who put forward, every London season, some new specific, just as the nurseryman produces his new annuals, or the mercer his novelties in brocade; and who, when the nostrum fails, offer the waters of Vichy or Homburg, to their deluded patient, as a plausible *bouquet d'adieu*.

It was whispered, however, by Dr. Royd and others of the gossips of Arden, that health was only a secondary consideration in the migration of the family; and when, instead of returning in October, according to their original announcement, the steward received orders to dismiss more than half the servants, as the family was to pass the winter in Italy, no one felt surprised. Some people insisted that the

completion of Miss Littlecote's education was the object of their visit. Some hinted that Sir Arscott, like other great personages and potentates, disliked, now that he was growing infirm, to be forced into a view, every Sabbath day, of the marble cherubim fluttering over the family vault, and, on all other days of the week, of the taper spire reminding him of its whereabout. But not a few believed in a grievous rumour that the heir-apparent had been anticipating the family revenues by heavy losses on the turf, and certain profligate extravagances, not incompatible with the dignity of his house.

Whatever the origin of their prolonged absence, gone they were; and though Mrs. Lambert discovered that the list of her poor pensioners was doubled by their departure, it was a satisfactory counterbalance that her companionless girl should be able to extend her walks in a spot so secure and so pleasant as Sir Arscott's domain.

Arden Hall was a charming old place,—quaint but dignified,—to which the Manor House, with its gables and evergreens might have appropriately served as lodge. How often, when her interest was excited by some historical anecdote connected with the spot related by Mrs. Marsden, or the passing allusions of Helen to the Western Gallery or green velvet boudoir of Lady Althea Littlecote, had Rhoda Lambert longed for a glimpse of the scenes connected with those aristocratic associations!—Now that they were emancipated for a time from the rule which almost vulgarised their grandeur, — now that the solemn silence of the place was broken only by the cawing of the rooks,—now that gaudy flunkeys no longer desecrated the echoing hall of ancient oak which seemed to demand beef-eaters and their halberds to guard the door, she experienced double gratification in visiting the forbidden spot.—For the siege was raised. A trifling gratuity to the homely upper-house-

maid, or Caleb Stevens the superannuated head-gardener, enabled all Arden to pry into the mysteries of the place. How much more the liberal offering of the rich young lady from the Manor House; who, having crossed their palms with gold, was solicited, rather than permitted, to come often and stay as long as she liked.

She *did* come often. She delighted in noting the variations of light and shade produced by different hours of the day and changes of atmosphere, on the galleries with their family pictures, and the saloon with its coved ceiling and antique furniture. Many a clever sketch did these picturesque interiors suggest to her pencil; many a wild conjecture to her mind:—partly as connected with Helen —partly with herself. Arden Hall was a practical lesson: a tangible illustration of the difference between middle-class life with its meagre, colourless, penurious tameness; and the many-hued, luxurious profusion of a more

polished class. It was as a Gothic Cathedral with its groinings, stained windows, and pealing organ, compared with the cold and simple meeting-house where her childhood's devotions had been offered up.

In the grounds, the secluded, old-fashioned pleasaunce encirling the Northern front, attracted her more than the pretty modern flower-garden created by Lady Littlecote. But the year was yet young. The out-door world had not donned its choicest attire; and one of the favourite haunts of Rhoda Lambert was the fruit-garden, whose walls were flushed with the early bloom of peach and nectarine trees; while in the midst, a quincunx of cherry, pear, and plum trees, exhibited their snow-white blossoms, like beauties at a bridal. There, the bees were already astir; —there, the chaffinches were piping up their merry notes as if in anticipation of a feast: —there, secure from interruption, came Rhoda morning after morning, sauntering, book

in hand, along the smooth gravel-walk that skirtedthe southern wall;—soothed by the hum of the bees that formed a drowsy accompaniment to the poetry she was committing to memory.

One day, when thus absorbed by her reveries and studies, a shadow suddenly fell on the volume upon which her eyes were intent; and on raising them, she was accosted by a man who roughly inquired whether "Stevens the gardener was about the place?" He spoke irreverently: for Rhoda, far more proud than vain, was at all times careless in her dress, and the intruder probably mistook her for a servant of the house; and the haughty tone of her reply probably surprised him as much as his unceremonious manner and address displeased herself. When he had passed on his way, however, her mistrust of the intruder was sufficiently excited to induce her to turn her head and ascertain whether he were really engaged in seeking

Caleb Stevens, or whether he were a chance intruder.

The latter surmise proved correct. At the distance of twenty yards, he had stopped short, and was leisurely surveying her; nor, when detected in the act, was he daunted into resuming his walk. Yet there was nothing to authorise such cool, self-possession. The intruder in those privileged latitudes was evidently some young farmer or workman, come on business to the Hall; who, like herself, had assumed the freedom of the place to enjoy the bright blossom of the fruit-trees, and the hum of the bees.

On resuming their walk, they soon lost sight of each other: nor was there anything in the outward man of the stranger to distract the attention of the romantic Rhoda from the vivid stanzas with which she was storing her mind.

The day did not pass without an unravelment of the mystery. The whole village of

Arden was in a tumult of gossip. On returning from her daily round of charitable visits to distribute flannel, physic, tracts, advice, and other items of domestic consumption, which *she* regarded as the necessaries of life, Mrs. Lambert brought back intelligence that "Mr. Littlecote had unexpectedly arrived to spend a week at Arden Hall."

A sad interruption to Rhoda's enjoyments; for to return there during his sojourn, was of course impossible. She even deeply regretted her morning's visit; for the man who had so insolently accosted her, was doubtless one of Mr. Littlecote's servants, and might possibly report to his master her intrusion into the forbidden precincts.

It was some compensation for the sacrifice, to listen to the absurd motives assigned by the Ardenites for his sudden apparition. Some said he was come to enjoy a little country-air during the Easter recess; others declared that the Hall was about to be let, and that Mr.

Littlecote was deputed to arrange the preliminaries. But those who had previously heard of a great fall of timber on the property planned for the following Autumn, inferred that Mr. Littlecote was desirous to overlook the marking of the trees, and see that the woods were not outrageously combed by the land-steward.

To refrain from all curiosity concerning the new-comer, would have been difficult to a country girl of nineteen, like Rhoda, to whom a baronet's only son, with the letters M.P. attached to his name, represented a species of prince. Helen had always spoken with the utmost deference of her half-brother. What Rupert said or thought, seemed to give the law at the Hall. But, even in the London papers, Rhoda had often seen mention of his name,—the only name familiar to her in those calendars of fashion,—as presenting petitions in the House, accompanying deputations, attending Speaker's levees, or parliamentary

dinners or court fêtes, or presenting some yeomanry cornet at the levee. In *her* estimation, Mr. Littlecote, M.P., was quite a public character. She almost wished she had not given so ungracious an answer to his groom.

To Miss Lambert, the Easter week of that recess, appeared to include fourteen days instead of seven; for so lovely was the April weather, that she deeply felt her privation of the free range of Arden Park. The shrubberies and pastures of the Manor, bright as they were with Spring flowers, and gay as looked the old gables where drooping masses of the lilac Wistaria hung down to intermingle with the rich deep foliage and vivid scarlet bloom of the pyrus japonicus trained against the basement, became tedious and circumscribed, now that she fancied herself a prisoner.

But at last, *at last*, she was released. A travelling phaeton, with post horses, rattled past the gates of the Manor House from Arden,

towards the London road; containing a gentleman arrayed in the extreme of fashion, with an attendant in livery. The volumes of dust raised by their transit, prevented the young lady (who was watching them from the identical staircase-window in which originated the disastrous accident of her sister,) from discerning whether the baronet's son were dark or fair, or by any means deserving the curiosity she had wasted upon him. But he had left her in possession of the field. Arden Hall was once more her own; and she hastened to take possession.

He had been gone long enough to change horses at his first stage, when she lifted the latch of the iron gate leading to the pleasure grounds; determined — though not without compunction — to repair at once to her favourite haunt; where she might possibly meet old Caleb Stevens, and elicit a word or two of information respecting his young master.

But alas! on reaching the spot, what a type did it present of the transitory nature of human enjoyments! Not a blossom remained on the trees, except here and there a few sere and withered petals, which the first breath of wind would bring down to the level of those already littering the ground. In place of that brilliant peach-bloom, only a dim dull wall, overstraggled with leafless branches! —The lapse of a week had denuded it of nature's bright brocade.—No more bees,—no more birds.—At that noonday hour, the very chaffinches were mute.

She had reached the end of the gravel-walk in no great charity with the individual whose coming had deprived her of so many delightful days, when the door leading through the garden-wall to the forcing-houses, suddenly opened; and in burst the gladsome sunshine, placing in relief the figures of old Caleb Stevens, hat in hand, with his snow-white hair gleaming like silver in the sun; deferen-

tially escorting a well-dressed young man, to whom, the moment he caught sight of Rhoda, he began to apologise for her presence.

"He hoped no offence to his honour. But during the absence of the family, the young lady from the Manor-House was allowed a walk, now and then, in the grounds. If not agreeable to his honour, she should never come there again."

Mr. Littlecote scarcely allowed him to conclude, before his own hat was raised; and advancing with eager courtesy towards Rhoda, he attempted in his turn to excuse the apology of the gardener.

"He trusted Miss Lambert would pursue her walks in the Arden pleasure-grounds whenever it suited her convenience. Nothing would give him greater pleasure than to suppose they afforded her the slightest enjoyment."

What would not Rhoda have given for self-possession to thank this easy well-spoken indi-

vidual as his politeness deserved! But words came not at her call. Unused to society of any kind, and addressed for the first time by a well-bred man, she found herself stammering stupid explanations of her conviction that he had left Arden, or that she should not have intruded.—"She had seen a travelling-carriage pass the village, some hours before, and fancied he was gone."

Rupert Littlecote replied by a cheerful laugh.

"You must not expect me to be flattered at learning that you mistook my friend Gresham for myself," said he. "Had you viewed him more leisurely, I trust you would have seen that he has the advantage of me by twenty years, as well as by a remarkable well-made wig and set of teeth. However, I must not resent the mistake; since the last time I had the pleasure of meeting you here, *I* was blind enough to fancy I was accosting the lodge-keeper's daughter!"—

An intimation not likely to re-assure poor Rhoda Lambert. She remembered well how morosely she had replied to the man in a tweed jacket and cap, who now, in broadcloth and beaver, wore so different an aspect. She only wished that this over-civil M.P., whose affability depressed her to the dust, would resume his business with old Stevens, and leave her leisure to escape.

Such, however, was not his intention. Dismissing the gardener by a potential nod, he proceeded quietly by her side, till they emerged from the gardens through the spring gate leading into the park. A week at Arden, with only his friend Gresham of the artificial hair and teeth, for company, probably inclined him for small talk; for he not only held open the gate for Miss Lambert, with the manifest intention of escorting her further, but by the time they had been walking and talking together for the twenty minutes requisite to reach the lodge, made a formal request that

she would permit him to accompany her home, in order to be presented to Mrs. Lambert.

"I seldom visit Arden when my father is here," said he. "Our hours, habits, and views are so wholly at variance, that we are sadly in each other's way. To make this world pleasant, Miss Lambert, one should avoid unsatisfactory collisions. Now that the family is in Italy, however, I am free to enjoy my own home, in my own way. I brought down Gresham, the other day, for a week's rook-shooting during the holidays; and as our sport has not been first-rate, you must not be angry at my endeavouring to repay myself for my disappointment by the acquaintance of some charming neighbours."

Very earnestly did Rhoda hope that, on their arrival at the door of the Manor House, the charming neighbour called Mrs. Lambert might be absent. The young M.P. was too great a man to be welcomed as their familiar guest. But he gave her no opportunity of

inquiring. Stepping courteously forward, he turned the handle and held open the door for her admittance;—doing the honours of her house to her as coolly as he had already done those of his own!—

CHAPTER XV.

If the inexperienced Rhoda had felt surprised at the metamorphosis effected in Rupert Littlecote by a change of costume, he was scarcely less amazed at finding the shy girl who, as an intruder at Arden Hall, had appeared foolish and awkward, expand at home into a companionable being.

Her secret wishes were fulfilled. Her mother was absent, in the village, engaged as usual in the distribution of advice, physic,

and flannel; and there was no drawback on the cheerfulness of the pleasant little book-room whose Elisabethan window over-looked a flower garden bright with early flowers and fragrant with budding sweet-briar.

Impressed as Mr. Littlecote had been, at their first chance-encounter, by the beauty of Miss Lambert's features and dignity of her air, her total want of address had subsequently disenchanted him; and he was wholly unprepared for the refinement perceptible in her home and surroundings. Nor did it at the moment occur to him that the wainscot of carved cedar and the few specimens of choice old Sèvres which ornamented the room, were evidences of the good taste of poor Miss Maudsley, rather than that of her tenants.

The half-finished painting on the easel, however, and the few well-chosen modern books scattered about, were Rhoda's own. Not the slightest vulgarity was perceptible:—no showy display,—no symptoms of the nailer's

daughter or reminiscence of Brummagem. When, after half-an-hour of lively talk,—criticisms upon authors new and old, and statesmen, past, present, and to come,—in the course of which Rhoda evinced extensive reading and her visitor considerable knowledge of men and things, Mrs. Lambert eventually made her appearance, in her grave gentle manners and puritanical simplicity of dress, there was nothing to deteriorate the favourable impressions previously imbibed. The old lady was neither fussy nor servile, and gave herself little trouble to entertain him. He was there of his own accord; and if Arden Hall chose to come to the Manor House, the Manor House must be accepted with all its imperfections.

When at length the conversation flagged so manifestly that the unbidden guest was forced to take his departure, he avowed so much predilection for the place, and lingered with such undisguised partiality, that it was impossible not to express a hope of seeing him

there again on his return, at some future period, to Arden.

"But I have still many more days to remain here, my dear Madam," was Mr. Littlecote's ready rejoinder. "Though the rookery has disappointed me, the visit has *not*. I trust therefore that I may be at once admitted to the privileges of near neighbourship. Tradition asserts that the Manor House was formerly the family residence of the Littlecotes: alienated from the estate, two centuries ago, by the marriage of a daughter with some Maudsley. It would be some compensation for the loss of the place to find myself an object of tolerance to its inmates."

The grave old lady, somewhat puzzled by his dictionary words, did not withhold either her hand or her consent: and though, after his departure, she expressed some regret at the visit, on the well-worn plea that unequal acquaintanceships never prosper, that her late husband wholly disapproved them, and that

Christina Barneson entertained a highly unfavourable opinion of the whole family at the Hall, she soon dropped the subject:—far more interested in the rheumatics of the Arden almshouses than in the qualities of the ancient tree of the Littlecotes, root or branch.

For once, Rhoda listened without rejoinder. A new world seemed opening before her. A veil was suddenly withdrawn from her mind, as, on a mountain side, the morning mists dispersing, disclose a fair landscape stretching far into the distance, — farmy fields and spreading parks, — towers, turrets, and village spires.—What a chance—what a lucky chance,—that the pastime of rook-shooting should have brought this accomplished cavalier to Arden, a fortnight before her mother's visit to the Barnesons!—For though she held to her resolution never to set forth again in the Bracknell Works, intending on the eve of the journey to affect illness or some other disablement, so that Mrs. Lambert might keep her

engagement alone, it would have been impossible, under such circumstances, to receive Mr. Littlecote at the Manor.

As it was, though his return to his parliamentary duties was fixed for the following week, she had many pleasant days before her. He had promised her, from his father's library, several illustrated works which she had expressed a wish to see. He had promised her flowers from the conservatory—plants from the gardens. And though inexperienced in the ways of flirtation, Rhoda did not doubt that he would be the personal bearer of some portion of these acceptable tributes.

But when, the following morning, immediately after breakfast, he looked in at the open window of the book-room, as if he had been time immemorial a daily visitor, Miss Lambert was a little startled. She expressed no surprise, however. They were soon engaged in looking over the plates of Monstrelet; and as he had entered the house unannounced,

the old lady was not disturbed from the devotional exercises which, at that early hour, detained her in her own room.

It is said that in certain districts of the East, when the nightingales arrive, the roses burst spontaneously into bloom. The coming of Rupert Littlecote to Arden, certainly brought sunshine and flowers. The London newspapers asserted that never had there been so fine an Easter; and the recluses of the Manor House seemed inclined to

> drink at every pore
> The spirit of the season.

An evening or two after Mr. Littlecote's first visit, the nightingales really sang in the shrubberies; and what more natural than that the solitary inmate of the Hall should saunter down to the village to call Miss Lambert's attention to the fact; and having enticed her to the lawn, to enjoy, what is always as welcome an incident in rural life,

as the appearance of the first violet,—entreat the old lady to regale them with a cup of tea as an antidote to the evil consequences of the night air?—Any request connected with health or diet, sufficed to conciliate her good-will; and so ably did the clever London tactitian adapt his conversation to her limited faculties, that when she took up her candle to retire that night, after his departure, she observed with the utmost naïveté to her daughter,—"a very agreeable, modest young gentleman, Rhoda. I'm sure no one would take him for a parliament man!"

What Rhoda took him for, she did not trouble her head to inquire. In *her* estimation, the Baronet's son, and Matthew Lambert's daughter, stood as wide apart as Tenterden steeple and Goodwin Sands. When Mr. Littlecote returned to his duties in the House of Commons, they would probably hear as little of him as they now did of his sister; and Rhoda would accompany her to

Birmingham, and, instead of reading picture-books and painting landscapes, busy herself in hemstitching caps and frocks for the little nephew or niece, which, at the close of the summer, was to add a new generation to the family.

So little did she dream of what was passing in the ambitious mind of her daily companion! — If, just then, the names of Birmingham or Barneson accidentally crossed it, they served only to provoke a shudder of disgust. Rhoda could not be blind to the fact that she was an object of intense admiration to her new acquaintance at Arden Hall. He could scarcely tear himself from her side; he could hardly restrain the avowal of his passion. Such an ascendancy, obtained, for the first time, over no matter what species of adorer, is a gratifying triumph. But when, as in the present instance, the victim realises every quality and qualification dreamed of by the utmost desires of his enslaver, it

is not in human nature to remain unmoved. Handsome, brilliant, gracious, high-born, wealthy, a fairy godmother could not have provided a more attractive suitor !—

That he was not yet a declared one, only tended to enhance the endeavours of Rhoda to complete his conquest. All the haughtiness of her nature had subsided. The anxieties that kept her pillow sleepless and her meals untouched, had so softened her deportment and veiled her eyes, that she was no longer the same person who had indited that bitter letter to Ferrier, and flung in the teeth of her guardian such cruel taunts.

Still, though Rupert Littlecote refrained from any positive offer of his hand, and though when he was away, she sometimes fancied that, after all, family pride would obtain the victory, no sooner were they together again, than her sex's self-confidence was renewed. He was probably waiting for a decent length of acquaintance to elapse before he

made his proposals. He had perhaps thought it necessary to precede them by an application for his father's consent.

One afternoon, a couple of days before the one fixed for his return to town, he made his appearance with a brow so contracted and an air so desponding, that Rhoda could scarcely refrain from inquiring whether he had bad news from Italy. She felt persuaded that an adverse answer had arrived from Sir Arscott.—In this conviction, a rash impulse instigated her to assert her own dignity.

"You are going back to town, Mr. Littlecote," said she; "and among the gifted and valued friends of whom you have boasted to me, will soon forget such homely personages as my mother and myself. *We* are little more than shopkeepers, and *you* scarcely less than noble. But what I wish you fully to understand is, that we are aware of the distinction, without assigning to it undue

value;—so don't be afraid that we shall be affronted to find you, if ever we meet again, holding your head so high as to overlook us.—The conduct of your family has already prepared me for such proceedings."

The countenance of her visitor instantly resumed its graciousness:—a little tempered, however, by the pensive air suitable to the eve of a separation.

"Once for all, dear Miss Lambert," said he, ("and would it were permitted to me to say dear Rhoda!) I must ask you totally and absolutely to disconnect me and my father. Sir Arscott is a man of yesterday. *I* am a man of to-morrow. *He* belongs to a race happily becoming extinct,—I, to an order hardly yet developed.—Providence (Providence be praised,) keeps up an even balance in replenishing the earth. The dodo is gone. The mastodon and megatherium exist no longer. But admire how many strange animals are daily discovered,—how many

new plants added to our gardens! For the lost Pleiad, a new planet is discovered quarterly. And believe me that, when Sir Arscott Littlecote is gathered to his forefathers, you will see in Sir Rupert, the legitimate inheritor of his houses and lands, his plate and pictures; but not of his errors and prejudices.—*Les Baronnets se suivent, et ne se ressemblent pas.*"

His fair antagonist seemed willing to take his future visits upon trust.—But she would gladly have dispensed with such farfetched illustrations as the dodo, or the whole fossil creation certified by Cuvier, for a straightforward assurance of his affection.—"Be my wife," was a simple phrase worth a thousand similes!—

She was not, however, fated to hear it.—He was embarrassed, sorrowful, absent. Every now and then, he uttered some peevish exclamation concerning the peremptory nature of his parliamentary duties; entreated her to

deal with the library and garden of Arden Hall as with her own; heaved a most plebeian sigh, wrung her hand at parting,—and disappeared!—

Next day, when one of the under-gardeners brought from the Hall, with Mr. Littlecote's compliments, a basket of forced strawberries and the gratuitous information that his young master started for London at daybreak, the old lady candidly congratulated her daughter on his departure, "His visits were becoming a sad interruption," said she, "though, I'm sure, my dear, you bore with him very good-naturedly. I suppose you understood him better than I did; for I scarcely ever knew whether he was in jest or earnest."

Nor Rhoda either!—But her heart was too sore to make the avowal.

"And now we've got rid of him," resumed Mrs. Lambert, "we shall have leisure

to make all our little arrangements for the visit to poor little Lettice.—I have promised, my dear, to be with her by the first of May."

CHAPTER XVI.

VERY joyfully was that promised visit anticipated at the Bracknell Works; where, cloudless as the brightest summer day, had passed the first winter of wedlock. The transformation of the dreary old house into what the partial eyes of poor pretty little Lettice regarded as a palace, was scarcely less miraculous than the metamorphosis of the grave, undemonstrative Mark into an idolising husband.

Even the household duties which sometimes convert the white robes of an inexperienced bride into sackcloth, and scatter ashes over her orange-blossoms, were spared to Mrs. Barneson. Christina, released from the cares of tuition, desired no better than to invest her governmental faculties in the questorship of the new house; amply rewarded by the sight of the sweet face of her sister-in-law, enjoying and conferring perfect happiness. Gentle, smiling, acquiescent,—with nothing sage to propound,—nothing brilliant to remark,—but noiseless and grateful as spring rain upon the turf. Never for a moment did she regret that the handsome Rhoda had not been preferred.—In his choice of a wife, as in all else, Mark had made proof of solidity of judgment. She even trembled when the time for Mrs. Lambert's visit drew near, lest the presence of her imperial sister should throw a shade over the happiness of the young wife.

Great, therefore, was her satisfaction, when, on the arrival of the old lady, it appeared that the pretty room which Lettice had taken such pains to adorn for her sister, was to remain untenanted. Mrs. Lambert was too truthful to repeat, as valid, the pretext of indisposition alleged by her recalcitrant daughter. In answer to the anxious inquiries of the Barnesons, she simply replied that "it did not suit Rhoda just then to leave home;" and Lettice was too well acquainted with the wilfulness of her sister to be surprised, and too fond of her to be resentful. After her vehement opposition to the marriage, it was not to be expected that she should at once unbend. —Another time.—They must wait !—

It was happiness enough, meanwhile, to hold between her own the withered hand of her kind old mother. The new possessions, — evidences of Barneson's thoughtful affection,—and her preparations for the expected babe, were duly passed in review. Mrs. Lam-

bert, though personally devoid of all taste for society, was gratified to learn that several families whom she formerly regarded as the grandees of Birmingham, had sought the acquaintance of the young representatives of Lambert and Co.;—and though the lameness of the young bride was accepted as an excuse for declining all invitations, many were looking kindly forward to a future period, when the obstacle might be removed.

Great changes, great improvements, were proceeding on every side: why not that among the rest?—Even Mrs. Lambert confessed that, under the government of the new firm, the Bracknell Works no longer resembled the murky region in which she had so long vegetated. The lofty chimnies of the new engine-houses carried off the smoke by which the inert Matthew had submitted to be stifled. The blackened brick walls and clock-tower of the yard, when whitened with cement, afforded reflected light. Above all, beyond the

plate-glass windows of the new drawing-room was a small conservatory, which enabled the poor little stay-at-home wife to enjoy throughout the winter the fragrance of spring; and throughout the year, in sooty Birmingham, blossoms as sweet and brilliant as those of Arden Manor.

As regarded the modern furniture, the old lady surveyed with wistful eyes the substitution of simple maplewood for the heavy dark mahogany, now appropriately reserved for coffins, which in her youth was prized as a valuable investment, and allowed to render still gloomier our sufficiently gloomy apartments. But the gay chintzes, which reminded her of her flower-garden at Arden, reconciled her to all; and, after enjoying several nights' rest in an airy French bed, she almost forgot her allegiance to the stuffy four-post catafalques of her earlier days.

The better charm of the establishment was, perhaps, lost upon her:—the charm arising

from cheerful faces, and the amended intelligence and conciliating deportment acquired by Mark Barneson. It was not happy love, alone, that had wrought the miracle. A more extended intercourse with the world, not only in the interchange of business but with persons of higher cultivation, good citizens and good patriots,—who, in the interests of their city—their county—their country,—welcomed cordially into their company the enterprising manager of the firm of Lambert and Co.,—had profited both his mind and manner. During the absence of the Lamberts at Arden Manor, he had formed many valuable friendships.

But that Christina's thoughts were, just then, fully engrossed by the coming event, she might have recalled to mind while she sat listening, in a luxurious, well-lighted room, to her brother's voice, as he read aloud to his mother, wife, and sister, at their work, some amusing book or the news of the evening-paper,—a certain Mark Barneson, uncouth, ill-clothed,

ill-mannered, with misery painted in his face, —expelled from Ryecroft Farm, and a stranger under the roof of his parents. *She* saw in him, however, only the happiest of men. It is in books alone that people pause, in the midst of peace and prosperity, to philosophise and analyse; or, perhaps, enhance their enjoyment by a paraphrase on those memorable lines of Dante, (quoted till their edge is worn off) concerning the aggravating memory of past happiness, in moments of misery.

At Arden Manor the sky was less serene. Though on her mother's departure without raising half the difficulties she expected, Rhoda congratulated herself on obtaining a month's command of her time, she soon found that time is scarcely worth commanding, when its wings are clogged with care. Read she could not,—paint she could not,—work she could not,—so utterly restless was her spirit. Her sole solace was to wander, hour after hour, through the shrubberies, beside the brawling

brook or fishponds chequered with water-lilies; taking no heed of their beauty or the progress of the spring, but recalling with that minute interest of which girls in their teens are alone susceptible, every word and look with which the absent Rupert had embellished that little domain.

That he would return no more, she was painfully convinced. It was the story of Helen over again; the dictates of family pride overcoming all impulses of personal affection. But in the present instance, the act of abandonment was voluntary. Her sister was a powerless girl, the brother an independent man: a reflection that served to embitter her mortification.

Oh! how her soul abhorred the word "trade," and the name of the Bracknell Works!—"The Commercial World,"—from which little shop-keeping England derives so much of her prosperity,—an orb which, held in the right hand of Britannia, enables her to

clutch with her left the riches and territories of every feebler neighbour,—was to Rhoda Lambert the epitome of all that is debasing. Rather would she have been the portionless daughter of the unworthiest peer of the realm, an "Honourable Rhoda" anything, than co-heiress of honest old Matthew Lambert's trade-bought wealth. But for those detestable chimnies of Bracknell,—but for that vulgar counting-house,—she should have become the wife of Rupert,—the future lady of Arden,—a star in the world of fashion—an ornament to the court.—Newspapers would have delighted to describe "the beautiful Lady Littlecote,"—artists to immortalise her, —poets to embalm her name in their dedications.

A paltry ambition, perhaps; but the craving after Stars and Garters, Red Ribands or Blue, a strawberry leaf or pearl the more in a coronet, or precedence over John Marquis of This, or Thomas Earl of That, at a

coronation or dining-room door, is not much nobler.

The letters she received from Birmingham were few and constrained. Still fondly attached to her, every member of the family at Bracknell felt that too intimate a picture of their happiness would be galling to the proud Rhoda, who stood aloof from them. But even the rare communications she received were frequently put aside for hours, ere she broke the seal. Ill news would reach her quicker than the post. For good news,—such news as *they* could send,—she was not impatient.

She had no other correspondents. It was one of her many quarrels with her position in life, that it left her without sympathy with those of her own degree, yet unable to obtain the sympathies of a higher class.

To find on her drawing-table one morning a voluminous packet was, indeed, a surprise. A greater still—for it was in the tell-tale days of franks—to find "FREE.—R. LITTLECOTE,"

inscribed on the cover, surmounted by the words "LONDON, MAY THE EIGHTEENTH;" sealed, too, with a coat of arms bearing the well-known supporters that figured in decayed stone on the gateposts of Arden Hall!

Rhoda Lambert was not a swooner of swoons. Her physical frame was as hard as her moral nature; and even startled as she was, she drew her favourite chair to her favourite window, in order to enjoy with epicurean luxury the perusal of a letter so satisfying to all the false appetites of her hungry pride.

That it contained a declaration of Rupert's attachment, who could doubt!—Since the days of Richardson's heroes, no one indites eight pages of small talk; nor, since those of Horace Walpole, even four, to commemorate the witticisms overheard at White's the preceding day. Mr. Littlecote could only write so lengthily to extenuate and explain his seeming inconsistency; or to make a yet stronger appeal to her heart.

But, for the extent of the avowals that now met her eye, she was indeed unprepared!

"She could not but have perceived," he wrote, "by his unconcealed distress in bidding her farewell, the influence she had attained over his heart. Had he been a free agent instead of son to the most arbitrary of men, he should, at that moment, at once have solicited her hand.

"If you knew my father," he continued, "you would be aware that family pride is his monster-failing.—To that Moloch, would he cheerfully sacrifice either of his children; and to seek the sanction of Sir Arscott to my marriage with an angel, if unendowed with a pedigree calculated to do honour to the ancient peerage of Arden to which he is likely to establish his claim, would be to court insult and prohibition.

"But we have now been parted for a month, dearest Rhoda, and my courage proves unequal to a longer separation. After revolving in my

mind, therefore, every expedient by which the obstacles of the case may be obviated, I have hit on one which, though you may not condescend to afford it your sanction, entitles me at least to make the avowal of my attachment.

"If, as I humbly trust, the feeling be reciprocal, let us marry at once, and trust to Sir Arscott's philosophy to pardon that which is irrevocable. But if my family be not consulted, we must, of course, dispense with the sanction of your own.

"I admit that the step is an extreme one; but in a worldly point of view, we have little to fear. On attaining my majority, I came into the enjoyment of the Bellasis property, derived from my mother, the late Lady Catherine Littlecote, producing about two thousand a-year; and my father's family estates are strictly entailed, subject to a dowry for every succeeding Lady Littlecote. Without disrespectfully speculating on the decease of Sir Arscott, his advanced age affords a guarantee

that, however bitter his enmity, it does not threaten a very serious prolongation of poverty. Of the personal affection of my sister Helen, you are already certain; and my stepmother, Lady Littlecote, is far too amiable a woman not to participate in the predilections of her daughter. In short, sooner or later, dearest, you are sure to become, what you ought at once to be, the idol of their hearts, as of my own.

"What I venture to propose, therefore, is, that if you deign to confirm my hopes of having obtained some place in your regard, you will consent to a marriage—not clandestine—but without reference to the opinion of our respective families. That you are alone at the Manor, I am aware; and give me credit, Rhoda, for not having profited by the knowledge, and hastened to Arden for a glimpse of you, before your sanction was fully obtained. One word, and I am with you. For such a marriage as I am able to propose, no prepara-

tions are needful.—Wedding-clothes can be as readily procured for Mrs. Littlecote as for Miss Lambert; and it will be my pride and delight to lavish on my bride all which it is customary to offer to a *fiancée*. As you are a minor, and wanting the consent of your legal guardians, a special licence is indispensable. But, so authorised, we may be united in the private Chapel at Arden Hall, by a cousin of my own, Mr. Littlecote, the rector of Mattingley; an excellent fellow, who would accompany me from London for the purpose. In the eyes of the world, such an arrangement would afford some sanction to our stolen match.

"But, dearest Rhoda, the project I presume to suggest, admits of no hesitation. Your family will shortly return from Birmingham; —mine, from Italy. We must take advantage of their absence. In a few days, I am able, by pairing off, to release myself for a week or two, from my parliamentary duties. You have

but to say "COME!" in order to command, now and for ever, the unalterable devotion of

"Your fondly attached

"R. L."

Considering the vehement indignation with which the proud Rhoda had repudiated the practicality of Alick Ferrier's proposals, it would not have been surprising had she slightly objected to the circumstantial nature of Mr. Littlecote's *plan de campagne*. But she saw no fault, in his letter. It said all she could desire,—far more than she had expected. But alas! amidst the struggle of feelings it served to rouse in her heart, gratified love had a moderate share. The moment she was assured of Rupert Littlecote's affection, it subsided into a stepping-stone to what she regarded as high ambitions.

For an hour, or more, she remained motionless in the old oak-chair, gazing out unconsciously from the Elizabethan window; but

with visions floating before her eyes, which, unsubstantial as they were, excluded every object before her. It was only for a few short minutes she entertained a doubt whether she ought not to hesitate in acceptance; — whether to be thus curtly wooed, thus speedily won, did not compromise her dignity. The dangers that might arise from delay were, a far greater evil.—As regarded a sense of duty, from the moment she learned to despise her mother as a tradesman's daughter, filial piety had been extinct in her heart; and as regarded the disgrace of a furtive wedding, to escape the presence of Lambert and Co. as represented by Mark Barneson and his family, was a sufficient compensation. She should miss the sweet face of her sister, smiling or weeping by her side. But the absence of the others would stand in lieu of a benediction. At length she rose; and, though alone, placed herself majestically at the writing-table—her best pen in hand—

her choicest satin-paper before her; and slowly indited an epistle, rivalling that of Rupert in length, but full of involved sentences and equivocal sentiments; vibrating between the sublime and the ridiculous:—a young lady's letter, in short, with all its worst imperfections.

When it had been carefully revised, folded, and placed apart for the postbag, Rhoda, feverish from excitement and the labour of composition, hastened out into the air. Since the day of despatching her insolent refusal to Alick Ferrier, she had not experienced a similar agitation of heart or mind.

But after wandering for a time beside the old fishponds and through the shrubberies, her exulting mood felt that these circumscribed limits no longer sufficed her; and with a sudden impulse of impatience, she hurried off to gladden her eyes with a sight of the spreading glades of Arden Park. Her own—or soon

to become her own!—Instead of fishponds, the artificial lake;—instead of shrubberies, the wild forest-scenes of Arden Chase.

How beautiful they looked—that day! softened by their spring verdure, and reflecting the dappled blue of a May-day sky.—The cuckoo was calling from the woods.—The crickets were chirping in the grass.—All was life and spirits; astir and hopeful, like the throbbing pulses of her expanding heart.

At her next visit, poor Grypp might be her companion. At her next visit, Rupert himself—But it was too much joy to contemplate!—

On her return home, she hastened to reperuse her letter before consigning it to the post. But the contact of nature had touched her heart, or, at all events, ennobled her mind.

The taper she had lighted for the purpose of sealing her epistle, served to consume the fragments into which she tore the con-

demned pages. For all her previous rigmarole, she substituted, according to Rupert Littlecote's suggestion, the simple word—"COME!"

CHAPTER XV.

Within ten days, the destinies of Rhoda,—no longer Lambert, but Littlecote,—were accomplished; and, as none but principals were in the secret, without let or hindrance.

Neither bride nor bridegroom was of a disposition to be confidential with servants. In Mr. Littlecote's arrival at the Hall, accompanied as before by his friend Gresham, and met the following day by a clerical cousin, who, when a brother Oxonian, had been a frequent

guest at Arden, there was nothing to excite remark; and on his signifying somewhat harshly to the old housemaid, his desire that the chapel should be cleared from its cobwebs and set in order, she decided that Mr. Thomas Littlecote, who had taken orders since he was last their inmate, was about to assemble the scanty household,—poor deaf old Caleb Stevens and all,—for family prayers.

When Miss Lambert, on the other hand, desired her attendant to pack up her wardrobe and dressing-box, for a journey, the young lady was supposed to be about to rejoin her family; and as the white dress and bonnet prepared for her sister's wedding had never since seen the light, it was easy, on the eventful morning, to make a suitable appearance.

Not the slightest suspicion had been excited. Not the most vigilant gossip in Arden was on the watch. Royd and Archdeacon Bilston were going their daily rounds as unconsciously as Brabantio when Desdemona was stolen from

him by the Moor :—little surmising that a travelling-carriage had carried off from the Manor House the beautiful plebeian to whom Bob Gresham was about to officiate as father; while the Reverend Thomas Littlecote and his parish clerk, who had accompanied him in guise of servant, performed the marriage ceremony that united her to the future master of Arden Hall.'

It was literally by the newspapers that the following wonderful intelligence was first circulated in the village :—

" On Saturday last, by special licence, at Arden Hall, by the Reverend Thomas Littlecote, rector of Mattingley, Rupert Littlecote, Esq., M.P., only son of Sir Arscott Littlecote, Bart. of Arden Hall, Warwickshire, and Allonby Priory in the county of Sussex, to Miss Lambert, of Arden Manor."

To the world at large, nothing could appear more respectable. An alliance between near neighbours, solemnised by a near relative,

in the Stammschloss of the ancient house of Littlecote, could not but be according to the Rubric.

Rhoda herself could scarcely believe her eyes, when she perused the paragraph; and in the triumph of knowing what sensations of wonder and envy this high alliance must excite in the vulgar mind of Birmingham, her conscience grew blind and deaf to the grief and injury inflicted on her mother and sister, whom a short note, despatched on the morning of the event, had alone prepared for its public announcement.

Perhaps she foresaw and cared not for—or perhaps she foresaw and cared for more than she would have liked to own,—the bitter tears shed by Lettice on being cautiously apprised of her sister's unfeminine conduct; and the silent, dignified grief of her venerable mother. For it was only on her knees before God that poor Mrs. Lambert avowed her humiliation. Regarding the sin of filial impiety as a crime

rather than a fault, she prayed that her undutiful child might be forgiven. But she prayed also for pardon for herself;—from the Almighty, for having so carelessly overlooked the religious training of Rhoda;—from her dead husband, that she had not exercised a more vigilant guardianship over her conduct.

Mark, meanwhile, stood utterly aghast. Long as he had prepared himself for mischief to arise from the impetuous temper of his sister-in-law, he had not supposed it possible she would thus boldly outrage the affections of her family, or the decencies of life.

From Christina, to whom alone he opened his heart, he could extract no opinion concerning the origin or prospects of Mrs. Littlecote's precipitate marriage.

"She cares not for *us*," replied his sister, drily. "Why should we care for *her?* Henceforward let us think only of Lettice."

She would not even allow him to revile the

ingratitude of Rhoda towards her kind old mother.

"Judge not that ye be not judged, my dear Mark," said she. "We are all to blame in this. It is we who laid the foundations of her vanity and self-confidence, by exaggerated admiration.—Let us talk of her no more."

Had Mrs. Littlecote been aware that her conduct was thus cavalierly discussed, it would have been a matter of indifference to her. For the young bride, the glass of life was running golden sands. To be an object of intense affection to a man so handsome, so high-born, so high-bred as Rupert, was in itself sunshine. But her lot comprised even more than this. Splendid tokens of matrimonial allegiance were hourly laid at her feet. The gorgeous gifts of the bridegroom, though announced as trifles, "promising more hereafter," were to Rhoda's inexperienced eye, as the crown jewels; and at Mr. Littlecote's desire, the dressing-box given her by

Mark on his marriage, was put aside to make way for a showy toy, fitted up with gold and turquoises, which converted her toilet-table into a shrine. A constant succession of rich gifts seemed to render every day a birth-day.

It vexed her that she could not as honestly applaud her dear Rupert's taste in friends, as in jewellery. She liked as little the cynical tone of Bob Gresham, as the saccharine subservience of his reverend cousin. Both were evidently his creatures. On her venturing some slight criticism on the perpetual acquiescence of the latter, Rupert Littlecote admitted that, even at Christchurch, the rector of Mattingley had acquired the name of "Fleecy;" a cognomen to which his flaxen curls, colourless eyes, and softly bleated affirmatives, certainly entitled him. The superciliousness of Gresham on the contrary, was only too impertinently manifest. The spirit of mockery which, in Rupert himself, provoked the mistrust of poor Mrs. Lam-

bert, was a thousand fold exaggerated in his *fidus Achates;* a dry-rubbed man of the world; whose age was a favourite problem at the Clubs, and whose origin, like his age, was an unknown quantity. Though perpetually smiling, to make the most perhaps of his costly minerals, Bob Gresham never laughed beyond his lips. His eyes remained grave, even angry, and his throat as dry as sawdust, while his lips opened mechanically to display those pearly treasures and to utter epigrams.—Tall, gaunt, ungraceful, he gave away poor Rhoda at the altar with an inquiring smile and sinister elevation of the eyebrows, as if wondering what farce was to follow this very sentimental comedy.

But on *him*, Rhoda was not yet sufficiently at ease with her husband, to descant; for he had evidently unlimited influence with Mr. Littlecote. It was Bob Gresham who had engaged for them the gem of a house in Curzon Street, in which they were installed

on their arrival from Mattingley Rectory. It was Bob Gresham who had selected the faultless carriage and horses, in readiness for them the day after their arrival. It was Bob Gresham who had collected their small, but well-arranged establishment; who had disposed of his friend Littlecote's apartments in the Albany; who had secured a pair, and a park-hack for him; and above all, who had circulated a report in the clubs and coteries, (to whose verdict the heir of Arden Hall was abjectly submitted,) that the heiress whom "his friend Litt," had carried off by a *coup de main*, was a beautiful creature, the image of Grisi in her girlhood.

To declare war against such a champion, was not to be thought of; and Rhoda accordingly kept to herself her dislike of the *Maire du Palais* of her new home.—Not that, at present, she was likely to profit by the golden opinions he was bespeaking for her. Either because the jealous bridegroom wished

for a time to enjoy her undivided smiles, or forewarned by his father's mistake in prematurely producing in the London world the rustic mother of his sister Helen, he persuaded his bride that, during the short remainder of the season, they had better seclude themselves from society.—Till she had been presented at Court by some member of his family, and till he had effected a reconciliation with Sir Arscott, they could not remain too quiet.

She desired no better. The glare and novelty of London life, even in its least brilliant form, sufficed for her enjoyment. Her morning's drive, the shops, the exhibitions, and occasionally the play or opera visited in the most unostentatious manner, were events to Rhoda. Bob Gresham, with one or two other fashionable friends of her husband, was their frequent dinner guest, from whose frivolous small talk, she gathered many a hint for her future guidance; grew familiar with names

—cognizant of customs; and seldom or ever committed herself by want of tact. With many a lesson to learn in the etiquettes of society, her aptitude supplied the place of experience.

The only drawback on her happiness was that, though some weeks had elapsed since her marriage and the parliamentary session was drawing to a close, no letter arrived from Sir Arscott. Her husband had duly notified to his father the step he had taken; for which, at the age of six-and-thirty, paternal sanction was not absolutely indispensable. But even if this formal intimation had failed to reach the family, the newspapers must have forestalled it. If the old man refrained from writing, it was because he was irretrievably offended, or that he was on his road home.

Rhoda, as has been before noticed, had no correspondents. Her mother and sister wrote once, in reply to the brief announcement of her marriage; fondly and forgivingly; but in

terms that plainly denoted their acceptance of her voluntary estrangement. They seemed willing to understand that, between the lady of Arden Hall and the "people at the Bracknell Works," sympathy was impossible. The account between them was closed. Neither of them wrote again.

But as time wore on, Mrs. Littlecote, still solitary amid the crowded haunts of the great metropolis, grew anxious for tidings of her family. She wanted to hear of their health; of the hopes and prospects of poor pretty little Lettice. Too proud to address them a second time till she was able to announce a reconciliation and good understanding between Rupert and his father, she waited and waited, in hopes of a letter.

In July, was annually made up the half-yearly balance of the accounts of Lambert and Co. Then, at latest, she must receive some communication from Barneson; for which she was the more anxious, that her husband,

with singular delicacy, had never yet alluded to her pecuniary prospects.

Every afternoon, on returning from her drive —the object of which was on most days to deposit her dear Rupert at the House of Commons,—her first glance on entering the house was towards the hall-table, on which were deposited the letters arrived during her absence. Every morning, when those of the early post were brought into the breakfast-room, she watched anxiously for one bearing a foreign post-mark.

For one addressed to herself, she had ceased to hope; and this consciousness of isolation rendered her almost jealous of the extent of her husband's correspondence. Five, ten, twenty letters sometimes awaited him; and had Rhoda been better versed in the ways of London, she would have known from the form and pressure of these letters, few of which were delivered per post, that their origin was far from satisfactory: — wafered, ill-looking

missives,—superscribed in clerkly handwriting. Since none of them, however, bore tokens of a lady's hand, she was content. The coarser, the commoner their aspect, the better for her peace. Mr. Littlecote's explanation that most of them were addressed to the Member rather than the man, reconciled her to being so thoroughly in the minority.

It was on one of the brightest evenings of an unusually bright summer, that, having accompanied Rupert as usual, after an early dinner, to the House, she drove back through the parks to Curzon Street, full of pleasant thoughts and anticipations. For on their way to Westminster, it had been agreed between the happy couple, that, should no letter of forgiveness arrive from Sir Arscott, authorising their departure for Arden Hall at the close of the session, they would enjoy together an autumnal tour on the Continent. In a week or two, Rupert would be his own master. They might then repair to Switzerland or the

Rhine, visiting Paris by the way.—How delightful a prospect!—the realization to Rhoda of how many a day-dream.

When, on reaching Curzon Street, she perceived a solitary letter deposited in the hall, a letter brought probably by the latest post, for once, she almost hoped that it might not be inscribed "*Inghilterra.*" The suspense which sanctioned her wanderings with Rupert in the land of mountain and flood, was no longer irksome.

The evening was closing in; and as the imperfect light did not enable her to decipher the address of the letter, she took it with her to the drawing-room, and hastily lighted a taper.

No,—*not* from Italy;—but bearing, to her great surprise, the post-mark of "Birmingham;" and addressed to "Rupert Littlecote, Esq., M.P.," in a handwriting hateful to her eyes.—What, what could place her husband in correspondence with such a man as Ferrier?—In a moment, it rushed into her

mind that the letter might announce ill-news from home, which no member of the family had courage to communicate. Her sister might be lost to her;—her mother might be no more.—Mr. Littlecote was perhaps deputed to break to her the terrible intelligence.

Without hesitation, she broke the seal; and, having mastered the contents of the letter, sank, as if paralysed, into a chair. Had her worst presentiments been realised, she could not have been more overwhelmed. —Poor Rhoda! Where was her often-boasted strength of mind?—Where were the visions of love and joy, which, ten minutes before, had placed her at the summit of human happiness?—Why had this abhorred intermeddler, this wily serpent, been permitted to render her Garden of Eden, a Paradise Lost!—

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